

Chapter 1

La Casa Black

Kill the spare.

Harry Potter woke with a jolt, stifling his scream as his hand hit his scar.

He took a couple of deep breaths, looking around his room and hoping his Uncle hadn't heard him.

He had fallen asleep at his desk, trying to get through his summer homework. Both tasks (sleeping and concentrating) were usually impossible since he had returned to Privet Drive. His sleep was almost always disturbed by horrible dreams of his last encounter with Voldemort and although they were becoming less frequent, Harry still had trouble dealing with them. His concentration was similarly affected as was his eating.

No one in the house seemed to notice Harry's withdrawal however, of which Harry was glad. Not that he would expect sympathy from his Aunt Petunia or Uncle Vernon and certainly not from his cousin Dudley, but they seemed to take great pleasure in over-working him a bit more than usual this summer.

All these aspects played a major roll in the way Harry felt and looked at the moment.

Harry moved to the bathroom and splashed his face with cold water. Looking up at his dripping face, he saw the normal untidy black hair which only sometimes could be made to cover the lightning bolt shaped scar on his forehead and the green eyes that had lost some of their brightness last June.

Almost fifteen years old now, he had always been skinny but the face that looked back at him was rather gaunt and the body hidden underneath his oversized hand-me-downs, while sleek and toned

from hard work was still lean from under-eating and growth. Harry guessed he had grown about 2 or 3 inches.

Pushing his glasses back on his nose, Harry returned to his room and gathered his work to return to his trunk. Once everything magical was safely locked away, he moved to get ready for bed, hoping to get some real sleep.

Harry heard the doorbell and glanced at his wrist, then remembered he didn't have a watch anymore. His old one had ceased to work after his hour in the lake during the second task last year. His alarm clock across the room showed it was 11:00 p.m.

The Dursley's rarely had guests arrive so late though, so Harry was curious enough to move to his door. Opening it, he heard voices but couldn't distinguish any words. He quietly moved closer to the staircase.

"Get out of my house," he finally heard his uncle shout. It was followed by a quiet response from the intruder.

"You can't have him," Harry heard his aunt's voice.

"Yes, I can and I will," Harry heard the intruder quite clearly now and almost doubted his ears. "Where is he, Petunia?"

"Sirius," yelled Harry as he bound down the stairs, his heart pounding like it hadn't for months.

"GO BACK TO YOUR ROOM, HARRY," shouted Uncle Vernon.

Harry stopped half way down the stairs.

Sure enough, standing in the open doorway was Harry's godfather, Sirius Black, looking better than Harry had ever seen him. Dressed in muggle clothing, boots with his jeans tucked into them, a t-shirt and a leather jacket, his dark, fathomless eyes, which were starting to lose the haunted look from his years spent at Azkaban, moved over Harry

in an inspecting sort of way. He ran a hand through his black hair that although neatly cut was longer than the last time Harry had seen him and he looked up at Harry's aunt.

"Don't you even feed him, Petunia?" said Sirius. Then he turned to Harry. "Get your stuff, Harry. You're coming with me."

An explosion erupted in Harry's chest, much like a Snitch had just taken off in his heart.

"No, he isn't," shouted Uncle Vernon, standing in front of Sirius like a blockade, his face purple with rage.

"You can't take him," said Aunt Petunia again.

Sirius ignored them both and looked up at Harry who felt as if he were frozen half way down the staircase. "Come on, Harry," said Sirius. "We don't have all night."

Harry heard shouting behind him as he raced back up the stairs to his room and started throwing everything he possessed into his trunk. He was going to live with Sirius. It kept echoing in his brain. His parents' best friend. He didn't stop to remember that his godfather was a convicted murderer who was on the run from the authorities. All he could think of was that Sirius had come for him. Sirius wanted Harry to live with him. He didn't stop to analyze why the Dursleys were arguing about having Harry leave. They hated him after all.

He grabbed Hedwig's cage (she was still out hunting) and dragged his trunk back towards the stairs. When he reached the top, the arguing continued.

"He can't leave here, Sirius!" Aunt Petunia kept insisting.

"I already told you, it isn't safe for him here anymore," said Sirius. "Now get out of the way." Sirius pulled out his wand. Harry's aunt and uncle instantly backed across the foyer.

Sirius looked up at Harry and pointed the wand at his trunk. The trunk instantly miniaturized. Harry tucked it under his arm and moved down the staircase suddenly feeling apprehensive.

“Where’s Hedwig?” said Sirius.

“Hunting,” Harry told him but as if on cue, Harry’s owl soared down from behind him and perched herself on Harry’s shoulder. “Well, she was,” said Harry.

“Good, I need to send a message to Remus,” said Sirius, digging through his pockets until he found a piece of parchment. Then he looked around. “Do you have a quill?”

“You just shrank them.”

“No matter.” Sirius then walked over to Uncle Vernon, pulled a pen out of his shirt pocket and scrawled something on the parchment. He folded it up, addressed it and tied it to Hedwig’s leg. “Remus is at the Weasley’s,” he told her. Hedwig hooted, nipped Harry’s ear then soared out the front door, which was still standing open.

“Let’s go, Harry,” said Sirius.

“Harry,” said Aunt Petunia.

Harry turned to them and felt awkward. He had lived with them for 14 years. True they weren’t particularly happy years but he had a roof over his head. “Thank you,” said Harry. He couldn’t think of anything else.

“Be careful,” said Petunia. Harry could’ve sworn he saw tears but couldn’t fathom why so figured he must have been mistaken.

“Behave yourself, boy,” said Uncle Vernon.

Harry nodded and Sirius grabbed his arm and pulled him out of the house.

“They were almost nice,” said Harry as he moved down the front walk.

“Part of your protection,” said Sirius. “I’m not sure how it works, it’s ancient magic, but they had to be nasty to you. You had to think they hated you.”

Harry looked up at him. “Why?”

“I just told you, I don’t know. You would have to ask Albus. He’s the one who put the spell on them and on the house.” Sirius took Harry’s miniaturized trunk and opened a compartment on the back of a motorcycle parked at the curb and placed it inside. “But Albus thinks Voldemort’s found a way around the spell, so it’s not safe for you anymore.” He turned and held out a helmet. “So now you’re coming with me.”

“But, Sirius, aren’t you supposed to be hiding?”

“Not anymore. Peter’s been seen frequently and apparently is quite proud of himself, because he’s publicly admitted what he did. They can’t catch him though and he never travels alone. Anyway, I’ve been cleared of all charges. Even if Fudge is in denial of everything.”

“I should have let you and Professor Lupin tear him apart,” said Harry, feeling the guilt wash over him again. He could still picture Cedric’s face, see the look in his eyes.

Sirius pulled Harry’s chin up and looked down into face sternly. “This is not your fault, Harry.”

Harry opened his mouth, couldn’t think of anything to say and closed it again.

“So get on,” said Sirius.

Harry looked at the helmet in his hands then at the motorcycle. “So where are we going?”

Sirius' hand fell onto Harry's shoulder and Harry looked up. "Home, Harry," said Sirius. "We're going home."

The explosion erupted again in Harry's chest. He wasn't sure but he considered it could be what joy felt like. Very like when he had won the Quidditch cup. Harry couldn't seem to help himself. He jumped forward and grabbed Sirius in a tight hug, his head buried in his chest. The feeling intensified as one of Sirius' arms came around him and a hand pressed Harry's head tightly to Sirius' chest.

Sirius held him away after a moment. "We have to get moving."

Harry nodded, trying not to look at his godfather. He put the helmet on and threw a leg over the bike. "Where did you get this thing?"

Sirius got on in front of him and started moving switches and hitting buttons. "It's mine. I loaned it to Hagrid to bring you here. When my name was cleared, he gave it back." The engine roared to life and Sirius steered them up the block. "It's got some very special features," Sirius told him. "It's even got some features that even I'm not sure what they are."

"How come?"

"Well, your father installed them and wouldn't tell me what they would do and well, I've never gotten up the nerve to try them," admitted Sirius. "I knew him too bloody well."

Harry's arms tightened around Sirius waist as he speed up to limit. For once he didn't feel remorse or anger or anything else when talking about his father. It seemed natural to talk to Sirius about him.

"Good. It's almost midnight. It'll be quicker now."

"What will be quicker?" said Harry.

"Getting there," said Sirius. "You aren't afraid of flying are you?"

“What kind of question is that?” said Harry, doing his best to sound insulted. He knew Sirius knew how well he could fly.

“A rhetorical one.”

“Sounded more like a stupid one to me.”

Sirius laughed. “Hang on,” he said and as he moved a level near the hand grip. The motorcycle lifted off the ground.

Harry’s arms tightened around Sirius waist and the bike bolted forward, faster than Harry had ever experienced. Harry felt the rush of the air around them, the power of the bike beneath them and felt freer than he’d ever felt in his life.

After a few minutes, he felt the bike turn and they circled around a rather large house.

“Is that it?”

“That’s it, Harry,” Sirius said. “And see that clearing to the left?”

“Yes.”

“That’s the field where the Weasley’s play Quidditch.”

Harry couldn’t believe his ears. “We live near Ron?”

“We sure do.”

Sirius touched down softly in the drive, pulled the bike to a stop in front of the car port and shut off the engine. Harry took off his helmet, still studying the red brick house. Three stories high it stood like a tall old tree. Harry had never seen a more beautiful house. This was going to be his home.

Sirius had gotten off the motorcycle and he took Harry’s helmet and put it away. “So what do you think, Harry?” he said. “La Casa Black.”

Harry was still staring intently. “I guess it’ll have to do.”

“You guess-“ Sirius reached out and ruffled Harry’s hair. “Come on, you smart ass. Let’s go inside.”

Harry followed Sirius to the door and into the house. Once inside, Harry took a couple steps in, his eyes scanning the hall, memorizing every detail. Sirius closed – actually slammed - the door behind them.

“SURPRISE!”

Harry was instantly closed in on and he was sure he had never gotten so many hugs in his entire life. All the Weasley’s were there and by the time he got to Ron, he couldn’t help himself. “Pinch me, Ron,” said Harry.

“What for?”

“Because I must be dreaming.”

“Oh, it’s no dream, Harry.” Harry heard a familiar voice and turned.

“Hi, Professor Lupin.”

“I’m not your teacher anymore, it’s Remus,” said Remus and he turned to look at Sirius. “Have any trouble with them.”

“Just a little,” said Sirius. “Why don’t we all go into the living room.”

“Can’t have a home coming without a party, right, Harry,” said Fred.

“Hello, Harry.”

“Hermione!” said Harry. He pulled her into a fierce hug and when he let her go, she kissed his cheek.

“Happy Birthday,” she said.

“Happy...” Harry heard a clock somewhere in the house chime and realized she was right. With all the excitement, he had forgotten.

Ron grabbed his arm. “Almost forgot, did you,” he said. “Well come on. I’m starving.”

He dragged Harry into a room where a table was spread with a veritable feast. Before Harry could even pick up a plate, something crashed into his leg, grabbing him around the waist.

“Oh, Harry Potter, sir. It’s true. It’s true.”

“Dobby?”

“Yes, Harry Potter, sir. It’s Dobby.”

“What are you doing here?” said Harry.

“Master Sirius hired me, Harry Potter,” said Dobby. “Dobby is so happy to be Harry Potter’s house elf.”

“Winky is here too,” said Sirius who joined the group. “But she won’t let me pay her.”

“She’s not still crying, is she?” said Harry.

“No, she’s gotten over the Crouches and is very happy to be working for a family again.”

A family. It echoed in Harry’s ears. He had a family now, a real family. A knot seemed to grow in his throat.

Sirius seemed to notice Harry’s distracted thoughts and changed the subject. “Come on, Harry. Open your presents.”

He was shown to a table where a pile of more presents than Harry had ever gotten in his life were piled. Among the memorable were several trick candies from Fred and George’s collection and the last one he opened from Sirius and Remus.

“That’s not just a watch,” said Remus as Harry put it on.

It looked like a regular watch. "It isn't?" said Harry.

"No," said Sirius. "It's been in my vault since you were a baby. I was supposed to give it to you last year, but as you know, I couldn't get to Gringotts."

"So what does it do?" said Ron, who was obviously interested as he grabbed Harry's arm to inspect the watch.

"That's a homemade watch," said Remus. "It was Sirius' idea, but James loved the idea so much, he insisted we all help and then Sirius would give it to Harry on his 14th birthday."

Harry recalled the clock at the Weasley's house which told who ever looked at it precisely where each member of the family was and pulled his arm away from Ron to examine it more closely. "So are you going to tell me what it does?" said Harry.

"Tap it with your wand and ask it what you should be doing," said Sirius.

Harry did just that and words magically floated across the face of the watch.

You should be enjoying the best birthday party you've ever had and not staring at some silly watch.

"Tap it again and say 'commentary'," said Remus.

Harry did.

Mr. Prongs would like to wish his son a happy birthday but is most annoyed with Mr. Padfoot for his tardiness.

Harry stared with amazement at the watch. But it wasn't finished.

Mr. Moony also expresses his best wishes but understands Mr. Padfoot's tardiness.

Mr. Padfoot apologizes for his tardiness but hopes he has made up for it.

Harry didn't expect anything else but sure enough there was one more message left.

Mr. Wormtail also expresses his best wishes to the birthday boy and does indeed hope he has many more.

"We created it similar to the way we made the Marauder's Map," said Sirius.

"Are these programmed responses?" said Harry.

"Oh no. That's the magic that James and I created," said Sirius. "It will respond honestly and in the present time frame."

Remus suddenly looked at Harry with alarm. "Did Peter say something?"

Harry didn't see much point in lying so he told them.

"Interesting," said Sirius.

"Why?" said Harry.

"Never mind, Harry," said Sirius. "It's getting late."

The party broke up and before he left, Ron pulled Harry aside. Meet us at the field after lunch for Quidditch."

"All right," said Harry.

"And wait until you see your room, Harry. It's great."

"You're just saying that because you helped decorate it," said Hermione.

Harry was now a little afraid to see it. Ron's room was painted orange. "I'm sure it's great Ron. See you tomorrow."

Harry was a little disappointed as everyone except Remus left. Sirius immediately sent Harry to bed, which he did gratefully. He found his room easy enough and thankfully it was not painted orange. Magical Quidditch posters lined the walls, which weren't blocked by bookshelves filled with wizarding books. It had a 4 posted bed with curtains like at Hogwarts and a huge desk by one of the windows. In the corner by another open window was a section obviously created for Hedwig. Harry's owl was looking very pleased from a very plush looking perch.

Harry walked to her and stroked her back. "So what do you think, Hedwig?" he said. She hooted and nipped his fingers. "Mmm. Me too."

Harry looked at the bed. He almost felt afraid to lay down. There wasn't much Harry was actually afraid of. He had endured excruciating pain and had escaped death 4 times. But for the moment, he was afraid. What if he went to sleep and woke up back at the Dursley's. He didn't think he could bear it if all this was gone.

He moved to an armchair next to yet another window and sat down. A light breeze ruffled his hair and he could smell the pine tree outside the window. Exhaustion overtook him and he felt his eyes lids close.

Harry saw the fire. A hooded figure stood next to a chair in front of that fire. The hooded figure held out a piece of parchment and a thin hand reached out to take it.

A cold laugh came from the chair. It was a laugh that Harry wished he didn't know.

"Is it good news, Master?"
"Oh, yes, Wormtail. Very good news. The boy has been moved."

"Then it's time to put your plan into action," said Wormtail.

"Yes. It is time."

“Master,” said Wormtail. He sounded very unsure. “Are you sure it will work?”

“It will work, Wormtail. The boy will come to me.”

Harry woke up abruptly. He was a little surprised that his scar wasn’t burning but the dream didn’t really show Voldemort showing any real signs of hostility so he could assume that was the reason. What did it mean? Was Voldemort talking about Harry?

Harry looked around. Everything was the same as when he had sat down the night before except Hedwig was gone (obviously out hunting) and he sighed with relief. He washed up and got changed then went down stairs, wondering if he should tell Sirius about his dream. He probably should, he considered. Sirius had told him very little about what was going on but Harry’s dreams were pretty accurate – at least according to Professor Dumbledore.

He could hear Remus and Sirius in the dining room and Harry stopped in the hall.

“So what does Dumbledore think?” said Sirius.

“He thinks Voldemort’s waiting for something. There is plenty of movement even though they are hiding out. The aurors are out in force but they can’t find them. The most prominent activity is Peter. It’s as if he’s looking for something,” said Remus.

“Or someone,” said Sirius.

“You think he’s looking for Harry?”

“Don’t you? He can’t be pleased that Harry got away last year.”

“True,” said Remus. “But I’m a little skeptical of Albus’ latest theory.”

“I’m not,” said Sirius. “Voldemort is just underhanded enough to try that. But I’ll be damned if I’ll let-“

CRASH

Harry cringed, looking down at the vase he had just knocked over. He had been inching closer to the door to hear better.

“Harry?” said Sirius.

“Sorry,” said Harry walking into the room. “I’m not fully awake. I fell asleep in the chair in my room and didn’t sleep properly.”

The two men seemed to accept that and Harry gratefully sat down as breakfast materialized before him.

“So Professor Dumbledore thinks Voldemort is biding his time?” said Harry. He didn’t see much point in hiding what he heard. Not to mention that he wanted to know.

“So that’s what happened?” said Sirius. “You know, Harry, you wouldn’t make a very good spy.”

“How much did you hear?” said Remus.

“Enough.”

“No one is sure yet,” said Remus. “We can’t tell you much because there isn’t anything to tell.”

Harry accepted it and the morning passed pleasantly enough as he listened to Sirius and Remus expound on various stories which included his father. At several points, Harry thought his sides would split open he was laughing so hard. It wasn’t until lunch when Harry remembered Ron’s invitation.

“Sirius,” said Harry. “The Weasley’s are going to play Quidditch in the clearing after lunch. Can I go?”

“All of them?” said Remus.

“Yes. Charlie is going too. I’d like to see how I do playing seeker against him.”

“All right, Harry. You can go,” said Sirius.

Harry jumped up. He couldn’t help smiling. “Thanks, Sirius.”

“Be home by dinner,” Sirius called behind him as he raced up the stairs to his room.

“I will.”

Harry collected his Firebolt but then noticed Hedwig back on her perch. She didn’t look very good. “What’s wrong, Girl?” said Harry.

She held out her leg wearily. Harry took the note off it. It was addressed to him but Harry didn’t recognize the handwriting. He opened it.

I know where you are, Harry. Who will it take to bring you to me? Perhaps your precious Sirius Black, or maybe Mr. Ron Weasley? Miss Granger might suit my purpose too. Who will it be, Harry?

Harry heard that cold voice in his head. “The boy will come to me.”

The parchment fell out of his hand as a fear he had never experienced came over him. It was a fear for the people he loved. It was now dangerous for anyone to care about him. He reached into his trunk and grabbed his father’s cloak. He finally had a home and a family and now he had to leave it.

Chapter 2

Owl Post

It took a few minutes, but Harry finally caught his breath and got his thoughts in order. After the intricate, highly thought out and executed plan that Voldemort had devised last year, this simply wasn't possible. It had to be a joke. An absurd cruel joke, but a joke non-the-less.

He reached down to pick up the parchment, praying that he would recognize the handwriting and could thusly curse Malfoy (the prime suspect) into the next millennium. But Harry didn't feel quite that lucky as he looked down at the foreign scrawl.

Could Voldemort know where Harry was?

The boy has been moved.

The parchment crumpled in his fist as he remembered his dream. Yes, Voldemort knew.

Harry threw a couple of things, clothes and the like, into his backpack, grabbed his broom and sprinted down the stairs. The fridge was next, just a few things. He moved quickly, before he changed his mind and before Sirius could realize what he was doing. He barely gave a backward glance as he yelled into the dinning room, "I'm sorry, Sirius." He dodged out the front door as he heard a muffled question from godfather behind him.

He jumped on his broom and took off. As soon as he was high enough, he threw the Invisibility Cloak over himself. It provided some shelter from the wind at that altitude but the cold that Harry felt suddenly wasn't from the elements. Several glances behind him showed La Casa Black growing smaller and smaller while the bitterness in Harry's heart grew stronger.

Harry was doing the right thing. He knew it. He wasn't flying for very long when he noticed that Hedwig was following him. "Thanks, Hedwig," he said.

A mixture of fear and rage rode high in Harry's emotions. Voldemort caused both feelings, which made Harry even angrier. Would Voldemort be able to track him? He would have to put some substantial distance between himself and his last known position. He wasn't sure how long he flew because his feelings overrode all sense of time. Harry was relieved to find himself at the base of a mountain surrounded by a forest at the end of the day. Landing there, he scouted around and found a cave, which after careful investigation Harry made instant use of.

It was only after Harry began to pick at the rations he had purloined from the kitchen that he noticed that Hedwig was looking at him oddly.

"What is it, Hedwig?" said Harry.

She blinked at him and held her foot out. Harry realized that she was waiting for a reply. He offered her a piece of the chicken he had been eating. She didn't even look at it. "No..." he whispered. Again he offered her food but she ignored it.

"What's he done to you, girl?" He stroked her, swallowing a lump that had formed in his throat. Hedwig didn't respond.

Furious again, Harry tore through his backpack until he found what he needed. He stopped himself from writing his first thoughts. Taking a deep breath, he chose his words with care.

You will not find me, nor will anyone else. I'm sure my friends are safe at Hogwarts now so you can not touch them.

Harry thought about adding something else but decided not to. After all, he wasn't 100% sure who the threat was. Now, he was

sure there was definitely a threat but he wasn't positive that it was Voldemort. He attached the note carefully to his owl's leg and she took off. Harry watched her, his throat still tight then he laid down, pulling his cloak over himself and promptly went to sleep.

When he woke up, he felt himself shaking. It was cold. He pulled his cloak tighter around himself and went out to find some wood for a fire. He managed to get a fire lit (despite his numb fingers) at the mouth of the cave then went off to do some hunting. Using the knife Sirius had given him last year for his birthday, Harry managed to corner kill a small rabbit. He felt bad about it but convinced himself that it was either that or starve. He also gathered some nuts and berries silently congratulating himself on his recollection of practical Herbology.

He returned to the cave and found Hedwig had returned. Harry was so hungry, he ignored her until he had prepared and put a piece of meat over the fire. He wiped his hands on his jeans then took the note tied to her claw.

Ah, so it is true, Harry. You have run away rather than see your friends at my mercy. My sources have confirmed it. Yes, your friends may be at Hogwarts but Sirius isn't, is he. He is dutifully searching the country for his godson. How easy he will be to find. But Harry, it doesn't have to come to that. Come to me now. I have no desire to kill you, only to talk. I believe that what I have to say will interest you.

Harry read the letter twice. Voldemort wanted to *talk*? And Harry was convinced now that it was Voldemort. Hedwig seemed to be waiting again. He offered her some food and was again ignored. Chewing thoughtfully on a piece of charred meat, Harry dug out some more parchment.

I can not think of anything that we might have to talk about nor can I imagine anything you might have to say that would interest me. Sirius can take care of himself and I'm quite sure you won't find him just as he won't find me.

As for your sources, make sure you pass on that I'm as good as dead. Famous Harry Potter is alone in the harsh, cold wilderness with no food. You don't have to kill me, Voldemort. Starvation and the elements will do it for you. So sorry to disappoint you, though I'm sure Professor Snape will find it quite amusing.

And what have you done to my owl?

Harry sent Hedwig back and went about trying to make the cave as comfortable as possible. He was a bit surprised when Hedwig returned to him by dinner.

Come now, Harry, I told you that I don't want you dead. I merely want to talk to you. You will be quite safe. Your last note was amusing but I am very sure that we do indeed have a lot to say to each other. For example, has anyone told you why I have wanted to kill you all these years? Would you like to know why now I don't? I could apparate anytime I wanted to into Hogwarts and take one of your friends with very little effort. You could too. Would you like to know why? I will explain it all to you, my boy.

Hedwig is under the Imperius Curse. You have a very loyal and intelligent owl but I had to insure that I was the only one who could correspond with you.

Harry stared at the letter. Voldemort could apparate into Hogwarts? He could hear Hermione's voice, "It's impossible. You can not apparate or disapparate on Hogwarts grounds!"

You could too. Voldemort had said. It had to be some sort of trick.

Harry looked at his watch. It was 8:00. There was very little daylight left but he surprised himself by considering it. Harry pulled out his wand and touched it to his watch.

“Commentary,” said Harry.

Mr. Padfoot is beside himself with worry and will likely thrash Harry when he finds him.

Mr. Mooney agrees that Harry needs a good thrashing but will be happy if he just comes home.

Mr. Wormtail thinks that Harry should indeed go and speak with the master. He will not be harmed.

Harry stared at the watch, waiting. “Come on, Dad. Talk to me.”

Mr. Prongs thinks that it would be the stupidest and the bravest thing he’s ever heard. But Harry is his father’s son and must make his own decision.

That clinched it for Harry. He picked up his quill and quickly wrote a reply.

So be it.

It was all he wrote. He tied it to Hedwig’s leg and grabbed the cloak and his Firebolt.

“Fly slowly,” Harry told Hedwig. “I’m following you.”

Harry wasn’t sure she understood but he managed to keep up with her until she reached a dense patch of trees. He landed before them and started walking through them. Apprehension was increasing in

his mind, in fact he was getting sick to his stomach now too. This was the stupidest thing he'd ever done.

He reached the end of the woods at a small clearing. He could see a campfire. Before the fire was a comfortable looking armchair with Voldemort sitting within it. Harry's stomach seemed to knot. He viewed the campsite. It was the same as his dream, except that there were several other chairs around the fire and a scattering of tents could be seen across from the fire. Harry assumed they were wizard tents and would therefore be small castles within the folds of canvas. Harry had found Voldemort's hidden hide-out. Too bad Harry had no idea where he was. That knot in his stomach tightened as Harry realized just how close his own hide out had been to this one.

Hedwig landed on the arm of Voldemort's chair and Voldemort looked at her.

"Back so soon?" he said.

He took the note off Hedwig's leg and Harry felt frozen again. Again he felt like this was the stupidest thing he'd ever done. What had Dumbledore said about Harry's damned curiosity? "...we should exercise caution with our curiosity.. yes, indeed."

Too late. Voldemort was staring at the note as if it didn't make sense. He turned it over, then over again with his long claw-like fingers.

Hedwig flew back towards Harry and perched on a branch of the tree beside him. Voldemort watched with interest. He stood up.

Voldemort was looking into the forest right where Harry was standing, Harry felt himself start to shake. This was madness. Harry took a deep breath and pulled the cloak off.

Voldemort looked surprised for only a moment, then he grinned – that evil smile of his.

"Hello, Harry," he said, his eyes moving over Harry's form. "Very resourceful," he said, indicating Harry's cloak and his broom.

“I’m here, Voldemort. What do you want?” Harry was surprised how calm he sounded but tried to keep it to himself.

“I told you, Harry. I just want to talk.”

Harry looked around the camp. There were only 2 Death Eaters that he could see. They were fully cloaked and otherwise occupied. No one seemed within hearing distance.

“No one here will hurt you, Harry. You are now under my protection.” The long white hand touched his chest in a possessive gesture.

Harry moved his gaze back to Voldemort. Those red eyes stared back. “Why?”

“If you sit down and talk with me, I’ll tell you everything you need to know.”

Harry looked at the ground. His heart was pounding now, and questions, too numerous to count, were running through his head. Would Voldemort actually answer honestly? Could Harry trust him not to just strike Harry down? Could-

Pain exploded in Harry’s head and he looked up taking a step back. His palm had also hit his forehead where the scar marred his skin.

“Ah, so that is true, as well,” said Voldemort. “When I get close to you, your scar causes you pain.”

“It’s true,” said Harry. The truth was so obvious, it seemed pointless to lie.

But Voldemort took another step towards Harry, raising a hand toward Harry’s face. Harry took another step back and hit a tree. It took all his concentration to stay standing. He leaned away but Voldemort’s hand came closer.

“What is it, Harry? Is my touch worse?”

Harry's gaze was locked in those red slits that Voldemort used as eyes. The pain in his head right now (and it was pretty bad) was not as bad as what he anticipated the pain would be as soon as that bony hand hit his face.

Harry closed his eyes briefly and took a deep breath, preparing himself. He would not cry out. Not for the pleasure of this sick and twisted creature. But the touch didn't come. When he opened his eyes, Voldemort was smiling at him.

"Very good, Harry," he said. "Bravery and endurance. I am pleased."

Harry only stared as Voldemort walked away and settled himself back into his High-backed chair.

"What brought you here, Harry?" said Voldemort, touching the tips of his long fingers together. "The fact that I said I could apparate into Hogwarts and steal one of your friends or your curiosity?"

Harry moved closer to the fire, his head still aching with an after-ring of pain. "Both."

"Good. Come." Voldemort indicated the chair on the other side of the fire. "Sit and I will satisfy that curiosity of yours."

Harry still felt pointedly disconcerted. He rounded the fire at a safe distance from Voldemort, not taking his eyes from the dark wizard for a moment. And rather than sit, he opted to stand beside the offered chair instead.

"You are still nervous," said Voldemort, an edge of a smile on his thin lips. "I will break the ice. Give me your wand."

The demand surprised Harry. "No, I don't think so." He reached for it, cursing himself for not thinking of it before.

"Expelliarmus!"

Harry's wand flew out of his pocket and into Voldemort's hand.

Harry stared at his now unarmed hand and had to bite back his growl of frustration. He let his fear and his feelings of growing helplessness simmer under a mask of anger. He glared outright at Voldemort. “I don’t know why you felt the need to do that. I don’t have the power to kill you.” Harry’s irritation made him brave enough to point out, “You said you didn’t want to kill me. Or is that because the wands don’t duel properly against each other?”

Voldemort’s eyes had never left Harry’s face through the tirade. “Ah, so the boy is capable of putting sentences together,” he said simply.

Harry felt so frustrated suddenly he let himself drop into the chair. He heard Voldemort’s soft laughter. It reminded him of when he was tied to Tom Riddle’s grave stone and he shuddered.

“What do you want, Voldemort?” said Harry.

“What I want from you is vast, Harry Potter,” Voldemort told him. “But first we will talk.”

“You keep saying that. I’m here. I’m listening. So talk.”

Again Harry heard that cold laughter. “First, do you know why our wands could not duel properly?”

“I do.”

“Tell me.” Voldemort leaned towards him, in an almost entreating manner.

“You don’t know?”

“I don’t, Harry. I have much to tell you. Will you tell me this?”

“Our wands have feathers given from the same Phoenix.”

An expression of dawning came across Voldemort’s face. “*Priori Incantatem*,” he said.

“Yes,” said Harry.

“You knew this?”

Harry stared at him, wondering how much he should say. He decided in this case, it didn't matter. "I knew we had brother wands," he admitted. "But growing up as I did, I had no idea what would happen if we forced the wands to duel."

"Ah, yes." Voldemort settled back into his chair. "You grew up much like me. Myself in a muggle orphanage and you with muggle relatives who hate you." Harry felt Voldemort's eyes studying him even more closely than before. "As you can see, our bond is even greater than I ever dreamed."

Harry was cold and he was hungry again. He was in no mood for riddles. "I see nothing. You have told me nothing. I'm still waiting."

Harry heard Voldemort's cold laughter again. "Ah, the impatience of youth," he said. "Very well, Harry. I will tell you."

Chapter 3

The Heirs

“So what would you like to know first?” said Voldemort.

How do I even know he won’t just strike me down? How do I even know I can get out of here? What worked before, Harry guessed he could try again. Keep him talking, and you stay alive.

“How do I know you won’t lie?”

“Harry, why should I lie when the truth is so much more satisfying,” said Voldemort.

Harry opted for the most pressing thing on his mind. “You said you could apparate into Hogwarts and steal one of my friends. Is that true?”

“I can indeed apparate into Hogwarts at anytime but I could not steal anyone out unless they too knew how to apparate.”

“So you *did* lie.”

“Well only partly,” said Voldemort with an impatient wave of his hand. “I needed something additional to tell you.”

“So you can’t apparate into Hogwarts.”

“I can.”

“How is that possible?” demanded Harry. “I was told it couldn’t be done.”

“It can’t be done by just anyone, Harry. But you know who I am.”

“Yes, but-“

“Who is Tom Riddle, Harry?”

Harry remembered. Tom Marvolo Riddle was Lord Voldemort – “The heir of Slytherin.”

“That’s right, Harry,” said Voldemort. “The founders had a catch in their creation of Hogwarts that the heirs would always be able to come and go as they please. Thusly, all the heirs of the houses can apparate to and from the school.”

Harry absorbed this then looked up. “You said you’d tell me why you wanted to kill me.”

“It is all related to the same facts,” Voldemort told him. “Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin had always had something to disagree about. They’re rivalry was palpable. You see, their powers were very much equal and they were both hesitant about challenging the other. That is when the others stepped in and forced Slytherin out.”

“So what does this have to do with me?”

“Harry, haven’t you been listening?” Voldemort sighed. “Don’t you wonder why the heir of Slytherin wants to kill you? Why you have inherited a vast amount of wealth? Why I have told you that you also could apparate into Hogwarts?”

It only took Harry a few seconds to absorb all that before he jumped to his feet. “Are you trying to tell me I’m the heir of Gryffindor?”

“Good heavens, he honestly didn’t tell you, did he?” said Voldemort with surprise. After a sigh, he went on, “No Harry, I’m not *trying* to tell you that, I *am* telling you that you *are* the heir of Gryffindor.

“The heirs are very powerful, which was why I had to kill your father.”

Harry flinched at that but Voldemort went on. “

“He was against me you see. I tried to get him on my side at first but he was stubborn. I tried to get Sirius too because if I knew, if I could get Sirius, I could have gotten your father. Sirius was too strong too. So I decided I had to wipe out the house of Gryffindor by killing the heirs. Your father and you.”

Those red eyes moved over Harry again in an expectant sort of way.

“But I couldn’t kill you,” said Voldemort. “And I can’t kill you now. We are too connected. So the only thing left is to have you join me.”

“Join you?” said Harry incredulously. “Never!”

“Yes, you’ve said that before. But curiosity brought you to me. I believe it will keep you here to see what I can teach you. And I can teach you much, Harry.”

Harry could only stare at him over the fire between them. Voldemort said he *couldn’t* kill Harry. Why not? Damn his curiosity. Harry did want to know. Dumbledore and Sirius never told him any of this. What else could Voldemort tell him?

“I have a room for you, Harry. Sleep on it. You can always leave in the morning.”

Harry was considering his options, if he really had any, when pain exploded in his head. Voldemort had gotten up and moved around the fire. Harry raised his eyes, meeting Voldemort’s gaze and felt the icy fingers grasping his chin, holding his face up.

Harry felt his knees starting to shake. The pain increased the longer Voldemort held his face but Harry couldn’t take his eyes from Voldemort’s.

“Yes,” said Voldemort. “I believe you’ll stay.”

He let go and Harry fell to his hands and knees, breathing heavily. “You can’t make me,” said Harry sounding braver than he felt.

“No, I know the Imperius Curse doesn’t work on you, but I believe I just made you too weak to fly.”

It was all too true, Harry acknowledged. He didn’t have the strength to leave now. He doubted he could even stand up without help. Well, he was still alive and if Voldemort was to be believed, Harry wasn’t in any immediate danger.

“All right, Voldemort. I’ll stay.”

Harry woke up feeling very strange. He could recall a woman helping him to a tent last night then through a number of rooms before putting him into the bed he now reclined on. Was he really in Voldemort’s hidden camp? Did Voldemort really think he could get Harry to join him? It was too incredible. Voldemort killed Harry’s parents, killed Cedric. He was responsible for countless deaths. He had been trying to kill Harry for years and he had been tormenting Harry in his dreams. Just what was he up to?

And just what did Voldemort intend to teach him, anyway?

That question got Harry moving. He found the bathroom easy enough and moved through the tent with growing ease as it seemed he was the only occupant. It was a rather grand accommodation. The room in the front was a marvel. It was a vast office lined with bookshelves containing books that ranged from wizarding fiction to ancient texts.

Harry moved to the archway and could see the flap of the tent. One more step and he’d be out in the open in the middle of Voldemort’s compound. Harry took a deep breath and stepped out of the tent.

There was some activity, Harry noticed as he scanned the area. Several men were standing over a table discussing some papers strewn over the table’s surface. Voldemort was standing next

to what was obviously *his* chair talking with two people. One was hooded the other Harry recognized. Professor Snape.

Voldemort noticed him and raised a beckoning hand. Harry wasn't sure he was up to another verbal confrontation but sighed and moved towards them.

The other two people turned as he approached and the hooded figure quickly left.

"So it's true," said Snape. "You're either incredibly brave, Potter, or indescribably stupid."

"Severus!" said Voldemort with surprise.

"And he doesn't look like he's been starving himself."

"I am completely capable of taking care of myself," said Harry. Dealing with Voldemort was bad enough. Did he now have to endure Snape's contempt dumped on him, too?

Harry flinched as Voldemort took a step toward him. "Did you sleep well, Harry?"

"Well enough," said Harry.

"Good. Are you ready to begin then?"

"Begin what?"

"Your training, of course," said Voldemort.

"So what's it to be first?" said Harry, unable to suppress the morbid cynicism he suddenly felt. "Murder and mayhem or maybe just chaos and anarchy."

Voldemort laughed very softly. It was an eerie sort of chuckle. "Severus, why didn't you mention how amusing the boy is."

"Amusing-

Voldemort silenced Snape by raising a hand. "Harry, the first thing you need to learn is how to apparate."

"Oh?"

"Yes, indeed," said Voldemort. "You must be able to find me whenever I call you."

Harry didn't like the sound of that. Voldemort called his Death Eaters by touching the Dark Mark on anyone of them. "If you think your going to burn your mark on me, you're-"

"Oh no, Harry," Voldemort interrupted. "There is no need for that, nor do I intend for you to become one of my faithful Death Eaters."

Harry just stared at him, waiting.

"Ah, yes, I know you are curious," Voldemort said and turned to Snape. "Harry has a vast curious nature, Severus. Did you know that?"

Voldemort didn't wait for a reply nor did he appear to expect one. He turned back to Harry. "We will be using Severus here for your first lesson as you know him well. He will be your initial focus." Turning back to Snape, Voldemort waved towards the forest. "If you would."

"Of course, My Lord." Severus Snape instantly vanished.

Voldemort circled Harry slowly. "Apparating, once you've mastered it, is quite easy but the initial learning of transfiguring your molecules from one place to another can be difficult and in some cases dangerous. I have no doubt however that it shouldn't be too taxing on you."

"So what do I do?" said Harry, feeling a little unnerved now that he was alone again with Voldemort.

"The key is to relax. Your concentration must be on you focal point. In this case it will be Severus. If your focused concentration is on him, then you can command your being to transfigure to where he is."

“And what is the command?” said Harry.

“That is up to you, Harry,” Voldemort told him. “Everyone has their own command. Go ahead and try.”

Harry nodded and stared at the ground. He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on Snape. The dull burning in his head was encumbering the process as he felt Voldemort circling him.

“Concentrate, Harry,” said Voldemort.

“I’m trying.”

“I told you to relax,” said Voldemort. Harry felt him stop in front of him. Far too close as the pain in his head could attest. “Focus.”

Harry opened his eyes and stared into Voldemort’s burning red eyes. His temper snapped. “How can I concentrate with you hovering over me. I can’t even think—”

Voldemort’s hand silenced him as he grabbed Harry’s chin. “Severus was right, you do have a temper. I will give you one warning, Harry. Control it with me, or you will be punished.”

Voldemort let go and Harry staggered back a few steps, his palm pressed to his scar. The pain was so bad he was surprised he was still standing. He guessed he wouldn’t do that again in a hurry.

Voldemort took a couple steps back and the pain began to recede. “Now try again, Harry.”

Harry closed his eyes again and he clenched his fists. *Get me out of this nightmare.*

“So you did it?”

Harry looked up and saw Snape in front of him.

“Impressive.”

“I lost my temper,” Harry told him.

“I assume he gave you a warning.” Snape looked down at him with disapproval. “You shouldn’t even be here,” Snape hissed at him. “You walked right into his trap. I thought you were smarter than that, Potter. When are you going to learn to do as you’re told and not what *you* think is best? Now I have to come up with a way to get you out of here.”

Harry blinked at him. “You?” said Harry. “Then you are a spy.”

Snape eyed him briefly as if wondering how much to tell him. “Not really,” he admitted. “More like a double agent. I report everything to Dumbledore and I report everything to Voldemort. They both know this, however, which is why I’m still alive.”

Harry saw Snape grab his arm.

“He’s calling me back,” said Snape. “Stay here, I’ll be right back.” Snape vanished again. He wasn’t gone long.

“What did he say?”

“Listen very carefully, Potter. As soon as I’ve figured out a way to get you back to Hogwarts, I will tell you. Until then, DO AS YOU’RE TOLD.”

“But Voldemort said I can leave anytime I want.”

“Don’t be a fool. Voldemort is so pleased with you, there is no way he would simply let you leave,” said Snape. “Now listen. He is the focus for the return trip. You are to use his signal to return to him.”

“What signal?” said Harry, not liking anything Snape had told him.

“I have no idea.”

Harry found out as pain exploded in his head. His hand hit his forehead and he closed his eyes again thinking what a nightmare his life was turning out to be.

“Ah,” said Voldemort, sounding very pleased. “So my signal works.”

Snape materialized beside them.

"So you can call him?" said Snape, looking down at Harry who still had his hand pressed to his scar.

"Indeed," said Voldemort.

"I don't much care for his signal," said Harry.

Voldemort gave that eerie chuckle. "Well I believe that will do for now," said Voldemort. "You need to eat and get some rest. Severus see to the boy."

"Voldemort?" called Harry as Voldemort started to leave them.

Voldemort stopped and turned back. "Yes, Harry?"

"What did you do?" said Harry curiously.

Voldemort raised his wand and touched the tip of it to right side of his forehead. The pain immediately returned to Harry's head. Voldemort lowered his wand and the pain went away.

"Great," muttered Harry.

Voldemort chuckled again and left.

Harry took a sip of his drink then returned his attention to the book he was reading. He was sitting in front of the fire in what he considered his own chair (it was the one opposite Voldemort's). Harry had been there for three days but Voldemort hadn't really taught him all that much. It seemed to Harry more like Voldemort was testing him rather than teaching him.

Harry had discovered, however, that he was strong enough to do a lot of magic without a wand. Useful and convenient as Voldemort still

hadn't given Harry back his wand. Voldemort was extremely pleased with this fact and in fact had tested him extensively on it.

Despite the verbal skirmishes with Voldemort (which amused Voldemort), Harry was treated well. That is, no one bothered him. The only Death Eaters who dared to approach him were Snape and on occasion Wormtail who Harry did his best to ignore.

Harry was starting to wonder if Snape was right. Whether Voldemort would let him leave. Harry did want to go back to school and he did want to see Sirius.

What really surprised Harry was how quickly he had gotten accustomed to his situation. He didn't feel threatened or afraid. In fact, Harry didn't feel much of anything. It was like some surrealistic dream that Harry was stuck in the middle of. He tried not to think of his parents because that only reminded him that he had allowed himself to be suckered into Voldemort's hands, even if Voldemort still hadn't showed any signs of hostility toward Harry.

All Harry knew was that for now, he was still alive, Voldemort had not threatened any of his family or friends and Snape was working on a way to get Harry out of there.

The scar burned dully on Harry's head, interrupting his thoughts. It grew increasing worse and Harry felt the moment Voldemort was close enough behind him to hear him.

"You can't sneak up on me, Voldemort," said Harry, his eyes still on the book. He heard the chuckle that Harry was starting to despise. Voldemort walked around the fire and sat down in his chair.

Voldemort's silence was unnerving. Harry looked up. "Did you want something?"

"No, Harry. I am merely waiting," said Voldemort. "Am I disturbing you?"

Harry wanted to say yes but thought better of it. He shrugged and returned his attention to the book. Just then two Death Eaters apparated next to Voldemort.

"Ah, there you are," said Voldemort. "How did it go?"

Harry watched as the two removed their masks. One Harry recognized as Lucius Malfoy the other he didn't know.

"We found him," Malfoy said. "We had to kill him."

"Pity," said Voldemort. "I would have enjoyed playing with him first."

Since Voldemort's gaze was on Harry, he became suspicious. "Who have they killed?" said Harry.

"Don't be alarmed, Harry. It's no one you care about," said Voldemort. "It was merely that treasonous Karkaroff."

Malfoy seemed to take great interest in the exchange and stared with loathing at Harry.

"So it's true," said Malfoy with a sneer that was obviously a Malfoy trademark. "The master has a new pet."

Pet? Harry's temper instantly snapped and he leapt to his feet. Burning anger and hatred coursed through him as he raised his hand toward Malfoy.

"*Crucio!*"

Chapter 4

Back to Hogwarts

I did not just cast that curse. I didn't.

The quiet in the compound was telling though. All Harry could do was stare as the other Death Eater helped Malfoy to his feet. Although Harry lacked the power to do the curse properly, especially without a wand, Malfoy had been thrown four feet.

Malfoy leveled a glare at Harry that was a combination of surprise and contempt.

“Oh, dear,” said Voldemort. “Harry, have you lost your temper again?”

Harry’s anger was still there but now it was accompanied by fear. Now was as good a time as any to test Snape’s theory and Voldemort’s assurances.

“That’s not all I’ve lost, Voldemort. I’m out of patience as well,” said Harry. “I’m leaving.”

Harry started walking towards his tent to get his stuff. He only made it half way when he was hit with the full impact of the Cruciatus Curse. Intense, all-consuming pain pierced every inch of his body as he fell to the ground, screaming.

When it stopped, he rolled over and took a couple of deep breaths. He felt Voldemort approaching and struggled to his feet, shaking. Harry turned to face him just as Voldemort reached him.

Voldemort grabbed his face.

“Harry,” said Voldemort. “I warned you what would happen if you lost your temper again.”

Harry could only stare into those red eyes. The pain was so great. And it was getting worse. Harry's legs were shaking and when they finally gave out, he hit his knees. Voldemort was still holding on, holding his face up so he could see Harry's face.

"How bad is it, Harry?" said Voldemort. "Is it worse than the Cruciatus Curse? So bad you can't even scream."

Voldemort raised his other hand and reached towards Harry's face. The pain was building. Harry felt his whole body screaming out in anguish. Harry stared into those red eyes and felt the hand grow closer. Harry knew what Voldemort was going to do.

Voldemort's finger touched the scar and it felt as if Harry's soul had exploded. The scream was ripped from his lungs and he didn't even feel the ground as he hit it. Voldemort had released him but the pain was still coursing through him.

Harry wasn't sure how long he laid there. Someone approached and bent to one knee before him.

"Potter?" It was Snape.

It took every ounce of strength but Harry managed to push himself to his hands and knees. He felt liquid running down his face. Was he crying? He didn't doubt it. He put a hand to his face and opened his eyes. Complete blackness.

"Potter?" called Snape again and this time Harry looked up. "Good God," Snape muttered. "Harry, can you get up? You're bleeding."

Harry? Snape had never called Harry by his first name in his life but Harry wasn't concerned with blood. He took a deep breath. "I can't see," said Harry.

"All right, Harry. Just hang on. I'll be right back."

Snape returned a few seconds later.

"We have to get you to Hogwarts," said Snape. "And I mean immediately. You'll have to apparate yourself there. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"I don't have the strength," said Harry.

"You have too or you'll bleed to death," said Snape. "Focus and you'll make it."

Harry closed his eyes again. *This is worse than a nightmare!* He concentrated, trying to picture the Gryffindor common room. The atmosphere around him felt different but Harry couldn't stay conscious long enough to figure out where he ended up.

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Harry ached all over. It felt like every fiber of his body was bruised. He tried to lift his arm and every muscle in him protested. He groaned in response but considered at least he wasn't dead.

"Harry?" The voice was Remus Lupin's. "Harry, can you hear me?"

"Yes," said Harry weakly. "Where's Sirius?"

"Sirius is still out looking for you. We're trying to get a message to him," said Remus. "You're very lucky Hermione is such a fanatic about facts. If she hadn't gone back to the tower to get a book, you could have bled to death."

"You mean I'm not dead?" said Harry. "This isn't Hell."

"That isn't funny, Harry," said Remus.

Harry wanted to say that Voldemort would have thought it was but didn't think Remus would have appreciated it. The thought of

Voldemort made Harry groan again. “Tell Sirius if I ever lose my temper, he has every right, and my permission, to thrash me.”

“Severus told us what happened,” said Remus. “It’s lucky for you that he convinced Voldemort to let you come back here.”

“Severus Snape,” said Harry. “You can tell Professor Snape that his debt to my father is paid in full and I am now in his debt.”

“Well, as honored as I am to have famous Harry Potter in my debt,” Harry heard Snape say, “Save the gratitude for later. I have the potion for your eyes and I’m afraid it’s going to hurt.”

“More pain,” muttered Harry. “Oh good.”

“No more than you deserve for the worry you put us through,” said Remus.

“I’m sorry,” said Harry. “Next time I’ll do what I’m told and not what I think is best.”

“Wise advice,” said Snape. “Are you ready?”

“I guess,” said Harry. He felt Snape lean over him and place a drop of liquid into each of his eyes. Harry blinked a couple of times, absorbing the drops. Harry screamed, feeling as if white hot pokers were thrust into his eyes. His hands covered his eyes.

The pain only lasted a second though and Harry took a few breaths to recover.

“Nasty stuff, Professor,” said Harry.

“Well, let’s see if it worked,” said Snape.

Harry moved his hands and blinked a few times as light filled the room. Everything was a blur and he automatically reached for his glasses. He slid them onto his face and peered around.

“Potions,” said Harry. “Bottle fame, brew glory, stopper death – and make a blind boy see.”

“So you do pay attention in my class,” said Snape.

“I do,” said Harry. “And the drops worked.”

“Good,” said Snape. He turned to the door. “You can let them in now.”

Mrs. Pomfrey open the door and Ron and Hermione ran in, both of them busting with questions.

They were sitting in the grass near the lake. Harry had just told them everything. He laid down on his back, letting them absorb it. It had been three days since he had woken up in the hospital and although he felt pretty good, he was still weak and tired easily.

“So, you’re the heir of Gryffindor,” said Ron looking more impressed than jealous. “No wonder you’re rich.”

“I inherited it, Ron,” said Harry. “It isn’t like I earned it. I can’t help what I was born as. The same as I can’t help that my name happens to be Harry Potter – a fact I’m starting not to like at all.”

“You wouldn’t actually join him though, would you, Harry?”

Harry looked up at Ron. “Join Voldemort,” said Harry. “The wizard who murdered my parents, has been trying to kill me since I was a year old, who now treats me like his favorite pet and derives great satisfaction in seeing me in agony? That Voldemort? Of course. I’m looking forward to it.”

Ron laughed. Hermione looked horrified.

“Oh, Harry,” said Hermione. “It just doesn’t seem fair. All the stuff you have to deal with.”

“Well as long as I have you two to help me, I guess I’ll do all right. And I have a back up plan.”

“You do?” said Ron. “What is it?”

“I’ll change my name, move to Bulgaria and play Quidditch with Viktor Krum.”

“Now that’s a bloody brilliant plan,” said Ron.

Harry laughed. Staring up at the sky, he was the first to see Hedwig circling. Harry sat up. He got the feeling it wouldn’t be good news. Hedwig settled on Harry’s out-stretched arm and held out her leg. Harry took the note off and Hedwig soared away.

I hear you are recovering well, Harry. I’m sure it won’t be long before I see you again. Don’t forget I still have your wand, your broom and your owl.

Oh, and, Harry, you don’t happen to be missing a large black dog, are you?

Chapter 5

The Duel

Harry groaned.

“What is it, Harry?” said Hermione.

“Voldemort’s got Sirius,” Harry told them. “I’ve got to go back.”

“No, Harry,” said Hermione. “It’s too dangerous.”

“I’ve got to.”

“Harry, talk to Dumbledore and Remus first. There has to be some sort of plan,” said Ron.

“Well, if there’s a plan, they should be keeping me informed because I’m the one who has to deal with him,” said Harry, sounding as bitter as he felt. “I have to face the most powerful evil wizard in history and they don’t tell me anything.” Harry stood up.

“Harry, please-“

Harry ignored Hermione’s pleas and closed his eyes, picturing Sirius.

What a nightmare.

Harry was facing the cage where a large black dog got to his feet upon seeing Harry. Harry waited, but Sirius didn’t transform. He felt Voldemort approaching behind him and waited until he was close enough.

“Why can’t he transform?” said Harry, his eyes still fixed on the form of his godfather.

“Because, Harry, I don’t want him too.”

Harry turned to face Voldemort. “I’d like to talk to him,” said Harry.

“Will you beg me, Harry?” said Voldemort.

“I won’t beg you for anything, Voldemort. But it would be a nice gesture on your part.”

The chuckle grated on Harry’s nerves. Voldemort raised a hand toward Harry’s face but stopped inches away. Harry didn’t move. He stared into Voldemort’s eyes, defiantly enduring the pain in his head.

“So who ever said I was nice?” said Voldemort.

“Well I certainly never did,” said Harry.

“Ah, Harry,” said Voldemort. “I have missed you.” He lowered his hand and waved his wand at the cage. “Very well. We will talk later.” He walked away and Harry turned back to the cage where Sirius stood looking down on him with a less than pleasant look on his face.

“Sirius-“

“Not now, Harry,” said Sirius. “I’m too angry to hear your explanations. Just listen. I’m here as part of the plan.”

“Plan? What plan?”

“I’m the designated hostage to get Voldemort to let you go back to school. We just need to motivate him in that direction.”

“Well, I don’t like that plan,” said Harry. “Why you?”

“Would you rather see Ron or Hermione in this cage?” said Sirius.

“I’d rather not see anyone in it,” said Harry, his anger growing. “And I don’t mind telling you that I’m not at all happy with the fact that everyone, including Voldemort, is making plans for my life. Not only that, but without even telling me what those plans are.”

“Harry, lower your voice-“

“I’m not a child anymore, Sirius-“

“Harry, you haven’t lost your temper again all ready?” said Voldemort. “And with your godfather.”

“He was just making a point, Voldemort,” said Sirius.

Voldemort looked at Harry. “What point was that?”

“It-“

Voldemort silenced Sirius by raising his wand. Sirius immediately turned back into the dog. “Sirius, Harry has a tongue. I’m quite familiar with it, so kindly let him answer for himself.” He turned again to Harry. “Well?”

Harry knew he better have a damn good answer, one that would appease Voldemort or he was going to be put in more pain. “I was only stressing that I didn’t appreciate having to deal with the most powerful dark wizard in history armed only with ignorance,” said Harry.

Voldemort stared hard into Harry’s eyes. “Very good, Harry,” he said softly then turned to Sirius. “He has a valid point.”

Voldemort left them and Harry leaned against the cage and sank to a seat beside it. He felt a paw on his shoulder and looked up. “You may not want to believe it, Sirius, but I’m not as helpless as everyone seems to think I am.” Harry sighed and rested his head back on the bars, closing his eyes. “I’ve managed to take everything he’s thrown at me and I’m still alive so I guess that makes me pretty durable.”

“Or incredibly lucky.”

Harry opened his eyes at the sound of Snape's voice.

"That too," agreed Harry.

"So you didn't do what you were told – again," said Snape, looking disapproving.

"How can I do what I'm told when no one tells me anything."

"Well it hardly matters," said Snape. He looked at Sirius. "It looks as if both plans are progressing exactly the way they were intended."

"Both plans?" said Harry.

"Yes, Dumbledore's and Voldemort's."

"I don't suppose you're going to enlighten me?" said Harry.

"I can't," said Snape.

"I figured as much."

September 1st was approaching fast and it seemed to Harry that all these plans that were allegedly in effect were getting him nowhere. Voldemort continued to test Harry's powers, which apparently were increasing at a remarkable pace if Snape and Sirius were to be believed.

Voldemort was pleased though and since both Snape and Sirius kept telling Harry to keep Voldemort happy, Harry guessed he was doing his job.

Harry had been reading more than he had in his life. Mostly out of boredom, but he was learning a great deal about the wizarding world. He was tempted to read *Hogwarts, A History* (he had a copy

in his tent), but decided Hermione might get mad if Harry could answer his own questions about the school.

He had a book about the Dark Arts open in his lap presently as he sat in his chair in front of the fire. Sure enough he found his name in it. He also noted it did indeed state that he was the heir of Gryffindor. Harry wondered why Hermione didn't know that fact before he did.

"You aren't trying to sneak up on me again, are you, Voldemort?" said Harry as he felt the flinch point. Harry had noticed that once Voldemort was close enough, it was usually the time that the pain would make Harry flinch.

There was the chuckle. "No, Harry," said Voldemort as he circled the fire. "I—"

A commotion in the camp drew their attention to a Death Eater who was entering the compound with a prisoner who was tied by the wrists and gagged and blindfolded.

"I guess they found someone for you to play with," said Harry. He dismissed the prisoner until he heard Sirius.

"Harry," called Sirius. "It's Ron."

Harry jumped to his feet and watched as his friend was dragged by his wrists towards the fire.

He immediately turned on Voldemort. "What is the meaning of this? You have—"

"Harry," Voldemort raised a hand. "I have no idea what your friend is doing here."

Voldemort turned to the Death Eater who turned out to be Wormtail, which just made Harry angrier. "What is going on, Wormtail?"

"I found him in Hogsmeade, Master," said Wormtail, looking very pleased. "I thought..."

“You thought?” said Voldemort. “I’ve been trying to break you of that habit, Wormtail. Did I ask you to acquire another hostage?”

“Well, no, master, but-“

Harry looked from Wormtail, who started looking nervous, to Voldemort, who looked somewhat bored. “You didn’t order this?” said Harry.

Voldemort raised his wand and Ron’s restraints fell off him. “No, Harry. I didn’t.”

Harry stepped toward Wormtail and shoved him away from Ron. “You stinking, worthless, miserable traitor. This is how you repay me?” Harry said. “I should have let Sirius tear you apart.” He looked over at Ron. “Are you all right?”

Ron looked around anxiously. “Yeah,” he said rubbing his wrists.

“What is this?”

Harry flinched as Voldemort took a step closer. But Voldemort was looking at Wormtail because he had fallen to his knees. Harry looked from one to the other. His gaze moved over Peter Pettigrew. “You didn’t tell him, did you?” said Harry. “He doesn’t know.”

Wormtail’s mouth was moving soundlessly and he had started to shake.

“Oh my. I don’t think I like the sound of this,” said Voldemort.

Harry couldn’t help himself, he started to laugh. Voldemort looked surprised at the reaction and turned on Wormtail. “What is it that I don’t know, Wormtail?” said Voldemort.

Wormtail was sweating now too and glancing around. Harry caught little words like “Master, and sorry, and couldn’t.”

Voldemort didn’t look pleased and he looked at Harry.

“Oh, no,” said Harry. “I want to see if he’s got the nerve to tell you.”

Wormtail looked as if his throat was knotted with fear. Voldemort looked at Ron.

Ron was apparently too surprised at being singled out by Voldemort that he blurted out, “Harry stopped Remus and Sirius from killing him. He saved his-“

“WHAT?” roared Voldemort.

“It’s true, Voldemort,” Sirius called from across the compound. “Harry stopped us from killing Peter.”

Voldemort stared down at Wormtail who was now quivering quite badly. “And when had you intended on telling me that the reason you escaped from your friends was because Harry Potter saved you –“ he glanced at Harry, “what were your words? stinking, worthless, miserable hide?”

“Master-“

“*Crucio!*”

Ron moved away as Wormtail started screaming and writhing next to him. By the look on Ron’s face, he was horrified. Harry understood. Ron had never seen a human under the curse before. And although Ron knew Harry had been hit with it a number of times, he had never asked what it felt like.

“Intolerable,” said Voldemort. “Not to mention dishonorable.” Voldemort reached into his pocket and pulled out Harry’s wand. Reaching it out to Harry, he said, “Kill him now.”

Harry looked at the wand then up into Voldemort’s eyes. “What?”

“The wizard’s code is very specific, Harry,” said Voldemort. “You have every right to take back the life you saved.”

Harry sent a glance to Sirius.

"He's right, Harry," said Sirius. "It's up to you."

Harry looked down at Wormtail. He was looking up pathetically. Harry recalled Dumbledore's words. "I knew your father very well, both at Hogwarts and after. James would have saved him too."

Harry took a step away from Voldemort, even though he would have loved to feel his wand in his hand again. "No I think you're doing well enough punishing him," said Harry.

"Very well," said Voldemort. "If you do not wish to kill him at this time," Voldemort pocketed Harry's wand and turned to Wormtail. "You will take Mr. Weasley straight back to Hogwarts."

"No," said Ron.

"Ron," said Harry, surprised.

Ron turned bravely to Voldemort. His voice was soft but it was clear as he asked, "Can't I – well – visit for a little bit?"

Voldemort approached Ron and lifted his chin to search his expression. Ron, of course didn't feel pain but his eyes were so round that Harry thought his eyes might fall out of their sockets.

"You choose your friends very well, Harry," said Voldemort. "They are both brave and loyal." He released Ron and turned to Harry. "I'll make a bargain with you. Your friend – Ron, is it? – may stay and visit. Maybe he will even assist in testing you today." He turned to Ron. "Would you like to see me test Harry?"

Ron nodded hesitantly.

"Very good," said Voldemort. "Then I will send him back to Hogwarts and you may go with him for the weekend."

"Really," said Harry suspiciously. "Why?"

“I dare say, you need some compensation for Wormtail’s behavior. And I need to decide what to do with him.” He turned to Wormtail. “Now get out of my sight. I will deal with you later.”

Wormtail scurried away.

“So how will we get back?” Ron asked Harry.

“I will deal with that later,” said Voldemort.

“I could apparate with him, if you taught him to apparate,” said Harry.

“Why would I do that?”

“Well for starters, it would make things a lot easier,” said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. “And why should I make things easy for you?”

“Well, it would be nice,” said Harry, feeling frustrated. But most of his conversations with Voldemort left him frustrated.

“So, who ever said I was nice?”

“Well, don’t look at me,” Harry shot back.

Ron was looking back and forth between the two of them.

Voldemort laughed this time. “Harry, why don’t you just ask.”

Harry glared at him. “Will you teach him?”

“Yes, Harry. If you’d like me too, I will teach him.”

Harry stared at him. “Then why the fuss?” said Harry.

“And miss that amusing repartee?” said Voldemort.

Ron couldn't seem to help himself. He snorted on his laugh. Harry looked at him and Ron's smile was contagious. Harry smiled and looked up at Voldemort.

"So, this test," said Harry.

"Ah, yes." Voldemort turned to Ron. "How well do you trust your friend, Ron?"

Ron's chin inched up. "I trust Harry with my life."

"Very good," said Voldemort. "I'm going to see if Harry can successfully put you under the Imperius Curse."

"Really," said Ron, looking at Harry. Harry rolled his eyes to convey that Ron shouldn't worry about it. "But, Harry. It's an Unforgivable Curse."

"I know that, Ron." Harry didn't dare mention that he had already done Cruciatus.

"You could get sent to Azkaban," whispered Ron.

Harry sent him a glare. "Would you rather I watch Sirius being tortured," Harry whispered back. He gestured at the cage. "I don't have a choice here."

All humor fled from Ron's expression as his mouth dropped open.

Harry turned back to Voldemort as if he just hadn't had to explain the rules to Ron. "Will I be allowed to use my wand?" said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. "Harry, don't be so silly."

Which meant no. Harry sighed.

"You're doing magic without a wand?" whispered Ron.

"I don't have much choice there either," said Harry.

Ron looked shocked again and he leaned towards Harry's ear. "Just don't make me do anything stupid, all right."

"Ron," Harry whispered back, "I'm not even sure I can do it without a wand."

"Are you ready, boys?"

They both turned to him. Harry nodded and faced Ron.

"Harry, you will put the curse on your friend and tell him to do two things he would not like doing. Do you understand?"

Harry nodded and looked at Ron.

"You've practiced on me before, Harry," said Ron, reminding Harry of the spells they used before the third task of the Triwizard Tournament. "Go for it."

Harry nodded and looked at ground. Two things that Ron wouldn't like doing. He lifted his head and his hand and looked at Ron.

"Imperio!"

Ron's eyes glazed over. Harry remembered the feeling of complete blissful emptiness that Ron would be feeling if Harry had done it right.

"Crawl to me and kiss my robes," Harry told Ron.

Harry was a little surprised when Ron hesitated. Good, Harry thought, fight it. "Do it," Harry insisted.

Ron fell to his knees, crawled forward and kissed the hem of Harry's robe.

"Stand up," said Harry.

Ron stood up.

"Hit me."

There was no hesitation, this time. Ron's knuckles connected with Harry's jaw. It sent Harry to the ground and broke the curse.

Ron looked down at Harry and was shaking his hand from the pain.

"Nice punch," said Harry.

Ron reached down and helped Harry to his feet. "Well no more than you deserved for that first one. I'm just glad you ordered me to get back at you."

Harry shrugged.

"Very well done, Harry," said Voldemort. He turned to Ron. "And you as well." He turned to Harry and waved towards the forest. "If you will, Harry. We can get the lesson over with quickly, I have things to do."

Harry apparated into the woods. It took Ron a little longer than Harry to get it down. Ron said it was because he had trouble finding a command. But Ron soon could apparate as easily as Harry.

Voldemort said they could leave as soon as they wanted, which they did. Hermione cried for ten minutes straight when they showed up in the common room. Ron went on and on about Harry's skills without a wand, which Hermione gasped over, and about Harry's library, which Hermione drooled over. But Harry was just glad to be back. He had a weekend pass and he didn't intend to waste it.

"Come on, Ron," said Harry. "Let's go flying."

Harry stared into the flames of the fire, still thinking of his weekend. He had played Quidditch with the Weasley's (most of them were at Hogwarts for their protection) and flew frequently around the

grounds with Ron and Hermione. Even without his Firebolt, Harry enjoyed it.

He was still wallowing in the glow of that happiness which prevented him from making a comment as he felt Voldemort approach him from behind and walk around the fire.

Harry looked up at him.

“I saw the flinch, Harry,” said Voldemort. “I know I didn’t sneak up on you.”

Harry couldn’t help his grin, he felt so warm in front of the fire.

I have a surprise for you today.”

“Oh?” Harry looked up. It was his memory of the weekend that made him say, “I don’t suppose you’re going to let me go back school is it?”

“No, Harry.”

Harry sighed, but his humor was still running good. “Well then maybe you’ll let me change my name, move to Bulgaria and play Quidditch with Viktor Krum.”

That must have really amused him because Voldemort actually laughed. “Oh, my, Harry,” said Voldemort. “How incredibly cynical you’ve become.”

“Yeah, well,” said Harry, looking up at Voldemort. “You try being famous for simply staying alive and see where it gets you.”

Voldemort chuckled again.

“So what’s the surprise?” said Harry.

“A very important test,” said Voldemort.

“Another test?” said Harry. “Very original.”

“A duel, Harry.”

Voldemort sounded almost smug and Harry grew worried. All humor vanished from his mind. "A duel? Between who?"

Voldemort gestured toward the compound and Harry searched it until his eyes fell on Lucius Malfoy. Voldemort couldn't be serious. But then someone else stepped up to the group Lucius was talking to. *Draco*.

"Harry, why don't you look pleased? I was told you are rivals. I would think you'd be happy to duel with your enemy."

"I would if it were a fair duel. Malfoy doesn't play nice with others, Voldemort. He's known me for years and knows all the right buttons to push. I'll end up losing my temper and bleeding to death. Sorry, but no thanks."

Voldemort caught Harry by the chin before he could walk away and stared deeply into his face. "I'm very pleased to hear how well you know your enemy, Harry," said Voldemort. "But I will be the judge of what is fair. We will be playing by my rules and anyone that doesn't follow them, suffers. Do you understand?"

Voldemort released Harry's face and Harry took two steps back, holding his hand to head.

"Do you understand, Harry?"

"Yeah, I get it," said Harry. Harry picked up his book and went to his tent. He had a very terrible feeling that this duel was going to be another nightmare.

Sirius agreed when Harry spoke to him at lunch.

"The important thing is to keep your head."

"I know that, Sirius, but I can never do that when I deal with Malfoy." Harry knew he was complaining but couldn't help it. "He knows what sets me off."

"Well you better get over it quickly because it looks like Voldemort's ready."

Harry turned to see Voldemort in discussion with the Malfoys. Harry didn't wait for Voldemort to call him. He strode over to the group. Malfoy looked at him with satisfied malice.

"Potter," he said.

"Here without your bodyguards, Malfoy," said Harry. "Are you sure that's wise?"

"I don't need them for this."

Harry ignored him and looked to Voldemort. "So, let's have the rules."

"This is to be a simple duel between two wizards of the same age and school year to determine which one is more powerful."

"No contest," said Malfoy.

"Draco be quiet," his father said quickly.

"To even out the field, Harry will not be using a wand."

Draco laughed at this and Harry glared at him. "Well, if I can't have a wand, can you gag Malfoy?"

"What's the matter, Potter? Can't take my comments?"

"No, *Draco*, it's the sound of your voice," said Harry. "I keep waiting for your voice to change so you might at least sound like a man."

Lucius had to grab Draco by the collar to keep him from leaping forward.

Harry looked back at Voldemort. "I told you exactly what's going to happen, so let's get it over with." With a glance back at Draco, Harry moved across the field.

The observers moved back to give the duelers room and Draco moved to about 20 feet from Harry. They both bowed slightly, both of them keeping eye contact.

As predicted, Draco started in on Harry immediately.

"So the Dark Lord won't let you play with a wand," he said, raising his own. "Afraid you might hurt yourself?"

Harry wasn't sure what curse Draco was going to throw because he raised his hand.

"Expelliarmus!"

But as soon as Harry shouted it, he heard it from Voldemort. Harry wasn't surprised to see that as soon as Draco's wand hit Harry's hand, it flew out of it and landed in Voldemort's.

"Harry, Harry, you're not doing it right," said Voldemort. "The test is to see how you do without a wand."

"Oh, all right, Voldemort, I'll play along," said Harry as Voldemort handed Draco back his wand. Harry looked across the distance at Draco. "So, come on, Malfoy. Let's see what you've got."

Draco sent a curse at him and Harry raised his hand, muttering a deflection. The curse hit his hand and went careening toward some watching Death Eaters. Draco sent another one, which Harry sent right back at him. The curse had Draco staggering around.

"So how do we know who wins, Voldemort?" said Harry, not taking his eyes off Draco.

"I will decide when I've seen enough," said Voldemort.

Draco recovered and was staring at Harry with a combination of outrage and frustration on his face. "So let's see what you've got, Harry," said Draco.

Harry had never heard his name spoken like the word itself was a curse and he almost laughed. Instead, he raised his hand. *"Impedimenta!"* he shouted.

Draco was knocked off his feet. Harry wasn't expecting Draco to attack from the ground so he barely ducked fast enough to avoid the curse after Draco yelled, "*Stupefy!*"

"Nice shot, *Draco*," said Harry. "Almost hit me."

Harry could tell that Draco was getting mad now. If Draco kept his big mouth shut, Harry might survive. But Harry didn't feel quite that lucky.

"So," said Draco, "The master's favorite pet is feeling cocky, is he?"

Harry ignored it – or tried to. "So, he's got you calling him master all ready?" They circled each other slowly.

Draco went on as if Harry hadn't spoken, "But then, you must be his favorite, or you'd be in a cage too," said Draco with a glance at Sirius.

Harry couldn't ignore that. His blood started to boil. "And has Voldemort marked you yet. Burned his sign onto you so everyone would know you are his possession?"

"Just who is the possession, *Harry*?" Draco taunted. "My father says that is a mark of honor."

"Honor?" scoffed Harry. "I've seen that honor. I've seen your father crawling to Voldemort and kissing the hem of his robes."

"Maybe if your father had had some of that honor, he'd still be alive."

That was the button. Harry saw red as rage swept over him.

"Harry!"

His name being called from two directions as a means of a warning didn't register. All he saw was Draco's smug expression. All he felt was that blinding anger. He raised his hand.

“*Crucio!*”

Draco Malfoy hit the ground screaming and Harry jerked his hand up, breaking the curse. Harry stared at him as his father helped him to his feet. The quiet in the compound was such that Harry was afraid to breathe. Harry really hadn’t expected the curse to work. It didn’t the last time he’d used it.

Voldemort said something to Lucius then looked at Harry. Harry’s gaze locked in those red eyes and couldn’t break away. Behind him, he heard Snape whisper something to Sirius. The rest of the Death Eaters were staring at Harry.

“Pay attention, Draco,” said Voldemort as he raised his wand. “*Crucio!*”

Harry fell to his hands and knees but didn’t cry out. The pain was just barely tolerable and after a moment, Harry amazed himself by throwing it off. Harry got to his feet.

“You see, Draco, Harry has been hit with that curse many times and has now learned how to counter it. How, you might ask. Because Harry has experienced pain even greater than the curse. Pain that makes the curse pale by comparison. Isn’t that right, Harry?” said Voldemort as he stepped towards Harry.

“Yet even though he knows what awaits him, he stands there. All these years, I have yet to see fear in his eyes when I look at him. And I have looked for it. Ah, there is the flinch.” Voldemort stopped a couple of feet away from Harry and waited for Harry to look up.

When Harry didn’t look up, Voldemort grabbed his chin and forced him to meet his gaze. The contact instantly put Harry to his knees. “And it’s getting worse, isn’t it, Harry?” said Voldemort, bending to keep eye contact.

“Voldemort-“

“Be quiet, Sirius,” said Voldemort, waving his wand at the cage. He held his wand hand very close to Harry’s scar and Harry

screamed in pain, his body jolting in reaction. Voldemort simply let go and stood as Harry collapsed on to the ground.

Voldemort turned back to the Malfoys. "But the fact is that Harry told me that this would happen. I told him I would decide the matter. Harry did lose his temper and has been punished."

Harry struggled to sit up. He felt an arm come around him and help him.

"Be quiet, Harry," said Snape. "Voldemort's not done with this lesson."

Harry nodded and Snape left to join the others.

"So tell me Lucius," said Voldemort, "What kind of idiot are you raising?"

"My Lord?"

"It's obvious to me that Harry has shown just how much magical power he has. He has dueled a peer without using a wand, without being hit by single curse and done damage to his opponent. So I ask you, what kind of fool taunts such a wizard to such a degree?"

"Master, you must understand, Draco and Harry have been at odds with each other since their first year. You heard them. It's second nature for them to taunt each other to the breaking point."

"Oh, I do understand, Lucius, indeed I do." Voldemort turned to Draco. "Draco?"

Draco stammered something pathetically, Harry couldn't tell what he said.

"Do you realize, can you comprehend how powerful Harry is? How powerful he will be one day?"

Draco started stammering again, as if he wanted to deny it but was too afraid. How Harry wished Ron was there to see it.

“Draco, do you realize that if Harry had had a wand,” Voldemort raised his own, “it would have felt-”

“*Crucio!*”

When Draco stopped screaming, Voldemort finished his sentence, “Like that.”

Voldemort started walking away and Harry quickly got to his feet. “Voldemort!” he called. “Voldemort!” he shouted.

“What is it, Harry?”

“I want to talk to Sirius.”

“Not now, Harry,” said Voldemort.

“Please!” Harry shouted after him.

Voldemort stopped and slowly turned around. “What did you say to me?”

Harry controlled his voice. “I said, please.”

Harry got the chuckle but Voldemort waved his wand at Sirius’ cage. “All right, Harry.”

Voldemort continued to his tent calling for several Death Eaters to join him.

Harry went straight to Sirius. “So is there a plan now?” said Harry. “I heard Severus talking to you.”

“Yes, you played that duel perfectly. It was exactly the demonstration we needed to get you back to Hogwarts.”

“Why? What did I do?”

Sirius blinked at him as if he didn’t believe his ears. “Harry, don’t you realize the strength you just showed today?” Harry blinked back at him. “Not just in raw courage but in magical power. You threw off the Cruciatus Curse and you used it without a

wand. Voldemort is practically drooling over the idea of having you on his side. But he needs you to be able to control that power. To do that, you need to go back to school.”

“But I can’t leave you here,” said Harry.

“Listen to me. Voldemort is not going to risk losing his advantage over you. Just do as you’re told and I’ll be fine.”

“What do you want, Voldemort?” said Harry, placing his plate on the ground beside him. He and Sirius had just finished dinner.

“Harry!”

“Oh, it’s all right, Sirius. I’m sure Harry is just still a little irritated with me for letting Draco see him in agony yesterday.”

“Actually,” said Harry, “You made up for that very nicely. Thanks.”

“So could it be that today was the day that the train arrives at Hogwarts and someone wasn’t on it?”

“Maybe,” grumbled Harry.

Harry felt the pain as Voldemort grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him to his feet. He let go right away but Harry took a step away.

“You could have just told me to get up, Voldemort. I’ve may have a short fuse but I’m not stupid.”

“No indeed,” said Voldemort, reaching for Harry’s face. Harry took an extra step back. “But you are going back to school anyway.”

“What?”

“Yes, Harry. As powerful as I am, I am not knowledgeable enough to teach you the fundamentals you need to control the powers you are developing. Therefore, you must go back to school.”

“And what about Sirius?” said Harry.

“We will make a bargain – a contract, if you will. As long as you adhere to the rules then Sirius will be treated well.”

“And what are the rules?”

“You will write to Sirius at least once a week, telling him of your progress and whatever else you wish to tell him-“

“Knowing that you will be reading it first.”

Voldemort only smiled and continued, “And you will return here to me at the Christmas break to be tested.”

“I can live with that,” said Harry.

“Then we have an agreement?”

“Yes,” said Harry and stared as Voldemort held out his hand. Hesitantly, Harry prepared himself then put his hand in Voldemort’s. Voldemort didn’t let go. Harry looked up. Voldemort’s free hand reached for Harry’s face. Harry pulled his hand out of Voldemort’s grip and grabbed Voldemort’s arm with both his hands to keep him from touching him.

“But know this, Harry,” said Voldemort. “Everything you do, now, will be because I allow it. Everything that effects you, will be because I’ve allowed it.

Harry didn’t like the sound of that. “You’re not my keeper,” said Harry.

Voldemort’s free hand grabbed Harry’s chin and Harry hit his knees. “Oh but I am, Harry,” said Voldemort. “The entire wizarding world now knows that Harry Potter is under my protection and no one will dare interfere with my plans.”

The hand that Harry was gripping was getting closer to his forehead. "Dumbledore," choked Harry.

"Yes, well, he will try, but I have a plan for him as well," said Voldemort.

Harry had no strength left in his arms and was more holding onto to Voldemort rather than restraining him. His hand moved closer to Harry's scar.

"No, Voldemort!" shouted Sirius. "Don't send him back like that!"

"It has to be like that, Sirius."

Harry started to shake as the hand came closer to his head.

"I can't take the chance of Harry apparating not to Hogwarts but to the forest so he can plan a way to help his godfather out of his cage." He glanced up at Sirius. "You know that is a distinct possibility."

"Harry," said Voldemort. "Be a good boy and go straight to school."

The scream erupted from Harry's soul again as Voldemort's hand hit Harry's forehead. Harry collapsed again at Voldemort's feet, shaking and breathing heavy. He pushed himself to his hands and knees. He felt the blood flowing from his scar all ready. Blackness was converging on him. But the pain wouldn't stop. What was he supposed to be doing? Do as you're told. Do as you're told.

It kept echoing in his head. But he could figure out what he had been told through the pain. He heard voices over his head. Through a fog, he focused on the voices.

"You held on too long, Voldemort! He can't concentrate."

Was that Sirius?

"You have to take him. You're the only one who can."

“Sirius, are you begging?”

“Yes, damn it. I’m begging. Please take him.”

Take him? Harry didn’t understand.

“Oh all right. I dare say it will be fun, showing up in the Great Hall during the feast and dropping Harry Potter at Albus’ feet.”

Another wave of pain hit Harry as an arm came around his chest and he was pulled to his feet. He screamed.

“Come along, Harry. Think about Hogwarts. Do it now.”

Harry heard screaming then dead silence before he hit the ground again. The ground was hard this time though, not grassy.

“Sorry he’s late, Albus,” he heard over his head. “Do take good care of him.”

Then silence again. Then a sort of buzzing whispering.

“Calm down everyone.”

Harry recognized that voice.

“Harry? Harry!”

Harry recognized that voice too and tried to answer. Someone rolled him to his back however and the pain was too much. Harry was pulled the rest of the way into blackness.

It was three days before Harry was allowed back to Gryffindor tower. Everyone who knew him treated him normally and Harry felt comfortable there. His trunk was already there, apparently Sirius or Remus had sent it.

The first time back to the Great Hall was another nightmare. As he, Hermione and Ron walked up the isle beside the Gryffindor table, Harry couldn't miss the whispering and staring from the other tables.

"Oh, ignore them, Harry," said Hermione. "Everyone will get used to you being back."

"Yeah," said Ron. "They're all probably still in shock from seeing You-Know-Who materialize in the Great Hall like that."

The question had been plaguing Harry. "Tell me I wasn't the one screaming."

"Well you did scream before You-Know-Who let go of you," Hermione admitted. "But when everyone realize who it was, there were a lot of screams."

"Great," said Harry.

They each found seats and began their breakfast. Then the mail came. Harry was surprised as Hedwig soared toward him. She dropped his Firebolt on the table before him, circled around and landed on his shoulder.

Harry took the package off Hedwig's leg and found two letters and his wand inside. He pocketed his wand and picked up the letters. The first one was from Voldemort.

Harry,

I have sent what you require for school. The cloak however was too big for Hedwig. While Sirius informs me that it does have it's uses in school, I don't really feel it's a requirement so it will remain in your tent for now.

Work hard and you will be rewarded. Remember the contract.

Harry's fist clenched around the letter. "Rewarded," he muttered. "How I hate that man."

"What is it, Harry?" said Ron.

Harry looked up and saw Ron looking at him with a puzzled expression. "Nothing," said Harry. He dared a glance at the staff table and found Dumbledore's blue gaze on him as well.

Harry sighed and ran his hand through his hair as he picked up the other letter. It was from Sirius.

Dear Harry,

Don't worry about me. Everything is fine here. Voldemort has moved me from the cage to your tent so I'm quite comfortable. He has the tent sealed so I can't get out but at least I have things to do and some privacy.

Try to concentrate on school and enjoy Quidditch. Everything will be just fine.

Sirius

PS And don't forget to write me next week.

"Why don't I believe him?" said Harry.

"What?" said Hermione.

Harry looked up and passed the letter across the table to Ron. Both he and Hermione read the note and looked up.

"Why don't I believe him?" said Harry. "That he's not still in that cage or that everything is going to be fine."

“He just doesn’t want you to worry,” said Hermione.

“Too late for that,” muttered Harry as he picked up his schedule. It was about the same as it usually was. The difference was, that his first week back that he was supposed to write Sirius about was a week of Hell.

Dear Sirius,

Well, I thought I'd be happy to get back to school, but I was mistaken. Since my dramatic entrance on the 1st it seems that most of the school is avoiding me again. Not that this hasn't happened before, but I was sort of hoping to find some comfort at being in the castle again.

Classes are a nightmare as well. Professor Trelawney is predicting my death in even more horrific ways than the past few years. Snape is keeping me to my word that I'm in his debt and have to behave, so Potions is absolutely boring with none of the verbal sparing we always had. Although, I think the rest of the class is happy because Gryffindor hasn't lost any points in that class because of me.

DADA class is too weird. While everyone else likes Prof. Moody, I prefer the old Professor Moody (who was Crouch). At least he liked me. I mean I know why he was protecting me and helping me, but at least I learned stuff from him. This Mad-Eye Moody looks at me as if I'm about to erupt into some scabby fungus or something.

The best and worst is that the Gryffindor Team has elected me the new Quidditch Captain since Oliver Wood is no longer here. While I argued until I was blue in the face that I wasn't qualified, the whole team agreed that the votes were counted and I was Captain. I'm very disconcerted about this.

Lastly, and what intrigues me the most, is that all my classes have become so easy. I'm not struggling in Transfiguration anymore. In fact, I'm excelling in it. Charms and Spells are a

breeze. Granted, Herbology still bores me since I'm not much of a nature person. But I'm finding it easier to get through the lessons.

Some feed back here wouldn't be amiss.

And please tell me you're all right. I can deal with everything here if I know that.

Harry

PS I keep trying to see Professor Dumbledore but he won't see me.

“It’s probably no more than he’s busy, Harry,” Hermione was saying. They were walking through the Halls back toward Gryffindor tower after another failed attempt to speak to Professor Dumbledore.

“Hermione’s right,” said Ron. “You’ve just spent a great deal of time with You-Know-Who. I’m sure Dumbledore will want to talk to you as soon as he can.”

“That’s what you would think. So why won’t he talk to me?” said Harry but then he turned to Ron. “And you’ve met Voldemort. Call him by his damned name all ready.”

“Maybe Snape is keeping Dumbledore informed,” said Ron, ignoring what Harry had said about Voldemort.

“That’s true, Harry,” said Hermione. “Maybe Professor Snape is telling him everything, so Dumbledore doesn’t have to speak to you as busy as he is.”

Harry considered that is was probably true but he would still feel a lot better if Professor Dumbledore would talk to him. If nothing else, to calm Harry’s nerves. Harry had always thought Dumbledore liked him. Was Harry doing things right? According to Snape and Sirius, the plans were going exactly as they were supposed to.

Harry didn't get it.

They sat down to lunch and Harry saw Hedwig soaring toward him. After reading the letter she brought him, Harry felt even more confused.

Dear Harry,

I told you, I'm just fine. Stop worrying about me.

I'm sorry your school year didn't start out happily. It can't be easy being Harry Potter but I know you can manage. Plus, I hear the school ghosts like you. That is a plus. Sir Nicholas, Moaning Myrna, the Bloody Baron...even Peeves. Don't forget them Harry, because they may become useful.

Prof. Trelawney can predict all she wants but Divination is a farce. As for Potions, just grin and bear it. At least you aren't getting detention, right.

Moody's reaction to you sounds a bit odd. Are you sure you aren't over reacting because of everything else? I would have thought that Moody would latch onto you and test you just as thoroughly as Voldemort has been doing. Watch him.

As for the simplicity of the classes: Your father hit Wizard Maturity early also. That's what it is. It's simply a growth spurt. Don't worry about. Enjoy it because by your seventh year, you may not have hit your second Maturity yet and everything will be hard again.

Congratulations on making Captain of the Team. And don't worry about it. You're a born leader, Harry. You'll pull it off. Just have a little faith in yourself. Obviously, your teammates think so too.

Keep your eyes open, Harry, and take care.

Sirius

Harry took a deep breath as he saw the PS. It was not Sirius' handwriting.

PS. Harry, the reason Albus won't see you is because he is afraid of your questions. Your vast curious nature demands that you learn the truth and he isn't ready to tell you the truth so he avoids you. I have told you, when you have questions, come to me and I will satisfy that curiosity of yours.

You know I won't lie to you, not when the truth is so much more satisfying.

He let Ron and Hermione read the letter.

“Sirius sounds fine, Harry,” Hermione said.

“Yeah,” said Ron. “Stop worrying about him because we’ve got double Potions in 10 minutes.”

“Great,” muttered Harry.

They made their way down to Snape’s dungeon but were stopped in the doorway by Malfoy surrounded by his thugs.

“How’s your head, Harry?” said Malfoy.

“Get out of the way, Malfoy,” said Harry. “We’ll be late for class.”

“Oh, yes,” he sneered. “You have to be a good boy in Snape’s class now don’t you.”

Hermione seemed to take offense on Harry’s behalf because she took a step forward. “Careful, Malfoy. Harry has a wand again.”

Since Harry had told them about the duel, Ron started laughing.

Malfoy had pinkened slightly but turned to Harry. “Got wizard trash and Mudbloods fighting your battles for you now, Potter?”

Due to his Quidditch training, Harry’s reflexes were as quick as his temper. He had Malfoy by the throat in an instant. “Lay off my friends, *Draco*,” he warned. “Or you *will* regret it. And I won’t need my wand.”

Harry was surprised that Crabbe and Goyle didn’t pounce on him. But he knew why a minute later.

“Problem here?” said Snape from behind Harry.

Harry let go of Malfoy and was a little surprised at Malfoy’s defense.

“Ah, no, Professor,” said Malfoy. “We were just discussing why we have different potions assignments for today. Mine is different from the rest of the Slytherin’s.”

Harry caught on. “And mine is different from the rest of Gryffindor’s.”

Snape looked from one to the other with a very intense look. “Interesting of you two to notice. If you will all join the class, you’ll find out why.”

As everyone filed into the classroom, Harry sighed and looked at Malfoy. “Nice save.”

“It wouldn’t have worked if you hadn’t caught on,” said Malfoy.

Harry shrugged and they walked into the dungeon and went to their regular stations.

Harry worked diligently on his potion, as did everyone else. He kept hearing Neville Longbottom behind him muttering about how it was never going to come out right. Harry heard Hermione beside him, whispering to him.

Harry turned around. "Look Neville," said Harry softly. Neville looked up at him. "You've got to get a grip. Our first year, you stood up to the three of us. The third year you conquered a boggart. You're the best Herbology student in the year. This is nothing more than Herbology that you cook. You can do this!" Harry told him.

"Problem, Mr. Potter?" said Snape.

"No, Professor." He gave a quick glance at Neville. Neville nodded at him.

"Miss Granger, you aren't helping Mr. Longbottom, are you?"

"No, she isn't, Professor," said Neville. "I have it quite under control."

Harry was impressed at how calm Neville sounded. Normally, Snape scared Neville to death. Apparently, Snape was intrigued to.

"Do you, Longbottom? Good."

Harry threw his last ingredient into his cauldron and a purple puff of smoke wafted out. Across the room, Malfoy's cauldron did the same thing. Harry met his gaze. Malfoy shrugged and they both looked at Snape.

Colored wafts of smoke were erupting from the rest of the class' cauldrons and Snape proclaimed them done.

"Now for the test," said Snape. "Mr. Potter, Mr. Malfoy, you will each take a sip of your potions."

It sounded like a dare to Harry. He dipped a goblet into cauldron and filled it. Then he looked at Malfoy. He had done the same thing and he raised the cup toward Harry in what was unmistakably a dare. They both drank.

Harry felt the cold envelop him before he felt the dull ache in his stomach. The cold made him shiver yet sweat formed on his brow as the pain in his stomach grew. He felt his knees hit the floor

as he grabbed his gut. He looked up and noticed Malfoy was on the floor too. Malfoy was convulsing.

“Well now, it seems that Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Potter have successfully managed to poison themselves,” said Snape to several surprised gasps. “The rest of you have the antidote. Who is brave enough to try to save their friend’s life. Because, if you did it wrong, it could kill them instantly.”

Harry looked up at his classmates. Even Hermione looked worried. Harry slumped to the floor, clutching his stomach.

He heard movement behind him then someone was sitting him up.

“Drink it, Harry.”

Harry looked up into Neville’s face.

“Drink it. I know I did it right.”

“Mr. Longbottom,” said Snape. “Interesting.”

Harry glanced at Snape.

“How brave do you feel, famous Harry Potter?” said Snape.

His eyes immediately returned to Neville and he nodded, opening his mouth. Neville held the goblet to Harry’s lips and Harry drank it.

Within a few seconds, the pain was gone. Harry reached up and grabbed Neville’s head. “Thanks, Neville,” said Harry.

The Gryffindors exploded with applause and cheers and Neville helped Harry stand up.

“Very good,” said Snape. “Fifty points to Gryffindor for that experiment.” Then he turned to the Slytherins. “Well, is anyone going to try to save Mr. Malfoy?”

“I hope not,” Neville whispered in Harry ear. Harry tried not to laugh.

But the Slytherins looked scared that their potion might kill him rather than cure him, so Harry told Neville. “You do it.”

“You can’t be serious, Harry?” said Neville.

“It’s your time, Neville. Go and be the hero.”

Neville looked at Harry skeptically and Harry nodded at him. With a shrug, Neville dipped the goblet back into his cauldron and brought it to Malfoy. Malfoy drank it and the antidote worked.

As Crabbe and Goyle helped Malfoy to his feet, Snape turned to look at Neville as he returned to his station behind Harry.

“Very well. Twenty more points for Gryffindor for Longbottom’s compassion.” The bell rang. “Class dismissed,” said Snape.

Out in the hall, Harry watched as the class converged on Neville. Neville looked like he had just won the Triwizard Tournament. It was a transformation that Harry just stood back and watched.

“That was pretty weird, wasn’t it, Potter?”

Harry turned to see that Malfoy had circled the group surrounding Neville to stand beside him. “What was weird?”

“That he actually poisoned us. I mean *us*.”

Harry studied him. There was no malice in his expression, just – well – just interest. “Interesting point,” agreed Harry.

“Well I guess he must have had his reasons,” said Malfoy, watching the crowd still congratulating Neville. “Guess it’s good for us that Longbottom discovered he had a backbone.”

Harry felt a little insulted for Neville for the remark. “He’s always had one,” said Harry.

“Of course,” said Malfoy, his eyes still on the crowd. “He comes from a strong family. He just had to find it.” Malfoy finally turned his head

and looked at Harry. "Well, see you," he said as he moved off down the hall.

Harry stared at Malfoy's back as Crabbe and Goyle fell into step beside him. For sure, the day couldn't get much stranger.

Ron grabbed his arm and started yanking him down the hall. "Come on, Harry. We've got to dump our stuff so we can get to the feast. I'm starved."

Harry laughed and the three of them hurried back up to Gryffindor Tower.

The Great Hall was decorated in full measure for the Halloween Feast. Ron kept a constant stream of conversation about how hungry he was. Hermione was trying to ignore him because he was "Always hungry." Harry was just happy that he could walk down the isle of the Great Hall to a seat at the Gryffindor table without being stared at.

Harry found a seat next to Fred across from Ron and Hermione at the table and waited for the announcements. The Gryffindor table erupted into applause when it was announced that Harry was the new Captain of the Quidditch team and Harry suffered through it, feeling his face turn all shades of red.

"Oh, Harry, stop it," said Hermione. "You were voted in. Deal with it."

"I know. I know."

"Hermione, leave him alone," said Ron.

"The *Youngest seeker in the century* is going to lead us to another Cup. Right, Harry!" said George.

“Here, here,” shouted Angelina.

“Cheers, to the best team Hogwarts has ever seen!” shouted Katie.

The entire table stood for the toast. Harry felt a bit awkward but was caught up with the enthusiasm. When the table sat back down, they noticed Professor Dumbledore on his feet.

“Um...er... sorry Professor,” said George.

“That’s quite all right, Mr. Weasley,” said Dumbledore, who continued with the rest of the announcements. Then he started the feast with a wave of his hands and the words: “Let the feast begin.”

The food was as delicious as it always was and the conversation ran like floods all around Harry. He was struggling to hear what Hermione was saying across from him when the pain exploded in his head.

His palm hit his forehead at the same time as the point of a wand stabbed him in the throat.

“Stand up, Harry,” said Voldemort.

Chapter 6

Breach of Contract

Harry stood up. "It isn't Christmas break, Voldemort."

Harry felt the wand move to the front of his neck and he stepped over the bench to stand facing the Hall in front of Voldemort.

The entire staff table had stood up but Voldemort kept Harry in front of him like a shield. The Hall was so quiet you could have heard a pin drop.

"Give me a reason, Albus," sneered Voldemort, tightening the pressure of the wand on Harry's neck.

"You won't hurt him and you know it," said Dumbledore.

"We have a Breach of Contract," shouted Voldemort. "His precious Sirius Black has escaped me. I could kill him right now."

"You won't," said Dumbledore. "Let him go."

Harry looked to Ron and Hermione, both staring back looking worried. He waved his hand from the wrist.

"He's mine now, Albus," said Voldemort.

Ron finally got the idea and pulled out his wand.

A bang from the foyer got everyone's attention.

Voldemort put a hand in front of Harry's head and moved his wand.

"*Crucio!*"

Sirius hit the floor at the doorway to the Great Hall.

"Don't make me put you in agony in front of the whole school, Harry," hissed Voldemort in Harry's ear as he moved his wand back to Harry's neck.

"Voldemort, I won't let you take him," said Dumbledore.

It was the distraction Harry needed. He summoned Ron's wand and ducked Voldemort's arm. Spinning around, yielding the wand, Harry was surprised to see nothing. Voldemort had vanished. Another turn showed nothing but the apprehensive faces of his schoolmates and Harry raced towards the door.

"Sirius," yelled Harry.

Dumbledore was busy calming the students as Harry helped Sirius to his feet.

Harry paced the common room of Gryffindor tower. "See, they aren't telling me anything."

"But-

"Hermione," Ron cut her off, "He's right. They're in Dumbledore's office now discussing the whole thing and Harry is here." Ron looked at Harry. "Something wasn't right about that scene."

"Exactly," agreed Harry. "Voldemort could have taken me out of the Hall right away, but he didn't."

"It's a test," said Hermione.

"What?" said Ron.

Harry stared at Hermione. She was right. Voldemort had been testing him all summer. But a test of what?

"It's a test of Harry's honor," Hermione told Ron. "To see if he will correct the Breach of Contract."

"That's mental."

"No, Ron. I think she's right," said Harry. "Voldemort was talking to Dumbledore about the contract to see if I would pay attention. But the

contract was with *me* not Dumbledore. I'm the one who has to negotiate a new contract."

"But-"

"Don't you see," said Hermione. "If what I understand of their agreement, You-Know-Who could've just grabbed Harry and left. But he didn't. He challenged Harry's honor."

"Right," said Harry. "Another one of Voldemort's tests."

"So what do we do?" asked Ron.

"I've got to go back. Now."

"Now who's being mental, Harry?"

Hermione had a look of sheer anguish on her face. "He does," she choked.

"Hermione!" Ron almost shouted, in complete shock. He looked back and forth between Harry and Hermione. "You two can't be serious."

"Ron," said Harry, "I have to re-negotiate the deal, otherwise he more or less owns me."

"No way."

Hermione turned to Ron. "Breach of Magical Contract is very serious Ron. Why do you think Harry HAD to compete in the Triwizard Tournament?"

Harry glanced at his watch. It was a little after midnight. "Look, I'll be back by Transfiguration Class at 9 tomorrow morning. This shouldn't take long if what Hermione and I expect is true."

"Be careful, Harry," said Hermione.

"I will," said Harry. "Ron, wait for me outside class in the morning, ok?"

"I'll be there."

Harry nodded and pictured the campfire in his head. *Another nightmare.* He thought.

He could see the campfire from a spot just inside the wall of trees. Voldemort was no where to be seen. Several Death Eaters where moving around the compound.

The minute Harry stepped into the perimeter of light, two large men grabbed his arms.

"So we caught you," said one.

"Easier than I thought," said the other.

"I need to talk to Voldemort," said Harry.

"Sorry, but the master has retired. He doesn't like to be disturbed."

Harry looked from one brute to the other. "Don't be ridiculous. He'll see me."

"I don't think so," said Lucius Malfoy who stepped in front of him. "He'll be very glad to see you in the morning, but for now-"

Lucius Malfoy had a very powerful right hook. Harry would've probably been thrown by it if he wasn't being held up. He could feel a trickle of blood flow from his left brow.

"Look," said Harry, "I have to-"

A fist the size of a Virginia Ham hit Harry in the ribs and he heard at least one crack and felt himself double over.

Lucius muttered something and Harry felt the ropes being fastened around his arms and ankles and the gag being fastened around his mouth. He had been magically tied up. He couldn't apparate back now. Stupid, Stupid, Stupid.

One of Lucius' henchmen kicked Harry in the side of the leg and he hit the ground. He got another kick in the face before they dragged him over to the cage and tossed him inside it.

"I'm sure the master will be most pleased to see you in the morning, Harry Potter," Lucius Malfoy said as he locked the cage door.

Harry was beginning to become accustomed to awakening feeling aches and pains but this time it annoyed him. Lucius had no right to do this to him. Harry had come here to do the honorable thing and they had beaten the crap out of him.

Harry tried to sit up. His hands were tied (too tightly) behind his back, so it was a struggle until he could lean back against the bars. Then he felt the pain in his chest. His ribs. How many had old ham fist broken? Then felt the pain in his knee. It was bleeding. What the hell had they done to it?

There was a stir within the camp and Harry looked around. He didn't think that this would make Voldemort very happy, but in all honesty, he wasn't sure.

Voldemort emerged from his tent, barking orders. He didn't seem in a good mood to begin with so Harry felt this didn't bode well for him. Maybe if he didn't move...

Harry's green eyes met that red gaze and knew it was too late. Voldemort stared as he moved closer to the cage. He wouldn't release Harry's gaze. Once Harry flinched, Voldemort turned to the camp.

"WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?"

"Master, Harry Potter has been re-acquired."

Harry wasn't sure which Death Eater had spoken but it obviously didn't please Voldemort.

"Re-acquired?" Voldemort turned back to Harry and his gaze swept over him, studying every part of him. He turned back to the camp. "And just who re-acquired Harry Potter for me."

The Death Eaters seemed nervous and Harry could have laughed if he could feel his jaw.

Voldemort kept walking amid his Death Eaters and Harry got annoyed. He hit his feet against a bar to get Voldemort's attention and raised his brows expectantly.

"Oh, dear. Sorry, Harry." Voldemort raised his wand and the gag and the binds disappeared.

Harry started to rub the sore spots.

"Harry, who did this to you?"

"I don't know."

"I think you do," said Voldemort. "But first tell me what you are doing here."

Harry rubbed his jaw. "You said we had a breach of contract. I came to correct it."

"You came on your own?"

"Yes," said Harry. "We need to make a new agreement."

"Give me your wand," said Voldemort.

"I don't have my wand," Harry told him. "Bad protocol."

"You came to me to discuss a new contract unarmed and-"

"I was attacked," said Harry.

"This is very distressing," said Voldemort. "When did you arrive?"

"A couple of hours ago," lied Harry.

"He is lying, Master," said a Death Eater. "It was Midnight-"

"Shut up you fool!"

"Oh very good, Harry," said Voldemort. "The guilty will damn themselves." He scanned his Death Eaters then turned back to Harry. "Just tell me who they are, Harry."

"I'd rather see you punish them all, then see who they turn on," said Harry.

Harry heard that chuckle again. "Very interesting idea, Harry."

Harry looked at his watch. It was 8:10. "Can we speed this up? Can't you deal with them later?"

"What is the hurry?" said Voldemort.

Harry sighed. "I have a class at 9 and if I'm late McGonagall will know I've been up to something last night."

Voldemort took a step towards Harry. "You mean Dumbledore doesn't know you've come to me?"

Harry met his gaze. "No. Only Ron and Hermione know I've come."

Voldemort studied him. He dismissed his Death Eaters. "What are you offering?" said Voldemort.

"I offer the same contract without the hostage. I will continue to write to you and will return at the Christmas break – on my own."

"But you have a condition, don't you?"

"Yes," said Harry. Voldemort stared into Harry's face. "You will promise that you will not take another hostage."

"You will trust my word?" said Voldemort.

"Neither one of us has a choice but to trust," said Harry. "If I breach the contract, you have a lot more power than I do to correct it."

"That is true."

"But," said Harry, and his voice took a tone he had never used in his life, "If you breach the contract, it will take more than a hostage to get what you want from me."

Voldemort gave that chuckle again and Harry wished he could wrap his hands around Voldemort's throat. "Is that a threat, my dear boy?"

Voldemort still looked amused as Harry stared into those red eyes. "No, Voldemort. That is not a threat. That is a prophecy."

All humor evaporated from Voldemort's expression. "So the heir finally understands?"

"He does," said Harry. "Do we have a deal?"

"Yes, Harry. I agree."

Harry felt a small amount of pain as Voldemort took his hand to seal the agreement, then with a nightmarish thought, Harry apparated back to the hallway in front of the Transfiguration class.

"Blimey," said Ron. "You can't go in looking like that."

Harry looked up at Ron. "What?"

"You're a mess."

Harry had forgotten. "Ok," Harry tried to think fast. "Tell McGonagall that I fell down one of the moving staircases and had to go to the hospital wing. I'll talk to you later."

"OK," said Ron. He stepped into the room just as Prof. McGonagall stepped out.

"Is there a problem, gentlemen?" she asked.

"No, Professor," Ron said behind Harry as he started to walk away. "Harry had a little accident and needs to see Madam Pomfrey."

"Mr. Potter," McGonagall called.

Harry turned around slowly, his eyes on the floor, hoping to conceal his face. But Harry found that his knee was more of a problem than he thought. It almost buckled beneath him. "Ma'am?" said Harry. "I fell down the stairs by Gryffindor Tower."

Professor McGonagall approached and raised his chin. "Oh, dear," she said.

She went directly into the class but came out a second later. Ron was shrugging at Harry.

"Mr. Weasley, go back inside and work on the lesson. I will take Mr. Potter to the hospital wing."

"I'm fine, Professor," said Harry. "Honestly."

"I see," said McGonagall. "Did the staircase tie you up before or after it fractured your knee and broke your ribs?"

Harry looked down at himself. His arm was wrapped around his chest and the blood filled gash was very clear around his wrist where the ropes had been too tight. He also noticed the blood soaking his pants down his leg from his knee.

"Um," started Harry.

"Be quiet, Mr. Potter," said Professor McGonagall.

But McGonagall didn't take him to the hospital wing. Before he knew it, Harry was standing, albeit very weakly, in front of Dumbledore's office.

"Come in."

McGonagall dragged Harry in and two men within turned around. Dumbledore looked up from his desk.

"Oh dear," said Dumbledore. "He did it, didn't he?"

"According to Mr. Potter, a moving staircase by Gryffindor Tower did this to him," said McGonagall.

"Harry-

"Sirius, please," said Dumbledore. "Minerva, you may return to your class. I will handle this."

"Yes, Headmaster."

As she left, Harry looked worriedly at Sirius then at Remus. But when he met Dumbledore's blue gaze, he flinched.

"Sit down, Harry."

Harry was afraid to sit down with the three of them staring at him. He was afraid to move. His eyes traveled over the room again and he felt himself start to shake. He had never felt afraid in this room before. What was wrong with him?

"Harry, sit down before you fall down," said Sirius, moving toward him.

Harry took a wary step back, hitting the wall and his leg almost crumpled beneath him.

"Harry," said Dumbledore. Harry met the blue gaze and saw him search Harry again as if he was looking through him.

It all spilled out of him. How angry he was for not knowing anything. That no one would tell him everything. That he, Ron and Hermione had decided the scene in the Great Hall was a test. How he had gone back but the Death Eaters wouldn't let him see Voldemort. How they had attacked him. How angry Voldemort was. That there was a new contract now.

Harry still had an arm around his ribs and a hand on the door frame to steady himself as he tried to remain standing. The wall he was leaning on didn't seem as strong as it did when he first leaned on it.

"You wouldn't even talk to me." Pain and the feeling of betrayal made Harry's voice hoarse. He felt the wall he was leaning on sliding.

"Sirius, help him."

Harry woke up feeling totally miserable. Nothing had been settled, in his mind anyway. Sirius had helped Harry into a chair and the best thing he remembered was that Fawkes had flown to him and settled on Harry's leg. The Phoenix' expression was so sad though that Harry felt bad.

"Don't look at me like that, Fawkes," he had said. But when the bird began to cry, Harry understood. The Phoenix' tears healed all of Harry's injuries in a matter of moments.

But that's when Sirius and Remus started to berate him on his stupidity and how he should do as he's told. And then Sirius grounded him.

That is what hurt.

"No Hogsmeades visits and your grounded until Christmas," Sirius had said. "And I mean grounded. No flying. At all."

Harry still couldn't believe it. He'd have to resign from the Quidditch team. At least temporarily and hope they would take him back after the Christmas break. If he was still alive by then. Harry was starting to hope he wouldn't be. Thinking of the break, Harry remembered his contract.

He collected a piece of parchment and a quill and ink and stared down at the empty page.

Voldemort,

I got caught. You should have mentioned to me what a mess my face was because I was hauled into Dumbledore's office. I had to tell them everything, Dumbledore, Sirius and Remus. But Dumbledore still wouldn't talk to me.

Then Sirius grounded me. I think I might prefer your punishment to his. At least the pain goes away. Now I can't play Quidditch for two months. So much for life's little pleasures.

My studies are going well, which should please you. I don't expect anything exciting within the next week so don't expect a very amusing letter from me next week.

Harry

Harry re-read his own words. Voldemort was right. He was becoming a cynic. Harry shrugged it off as he attached it to Hedwig's leg and sent her off. Saturday Gryffindor was supposed to play Ravenclaw.

The youngest seeker of the century is going to lead us to another Quidditch Cup!"

Harry felt like crying.

Chapter 7

The Truth

Harry waited until everyone left Gryffindor Tower before going down to the common room. He spread out his notes and pulled out his Divination book. He was going to concentrate. He was. But he couldn't. Not after the first cheers erupted from the stadium.

"Come on, Harry," Fred had said to him earlier. "Don't you want to at least see the game."

Harry, who was still Captain, assigned their new Keeper, Colin Creevy, to be Seeker then used a replacement Keeper. Colin was better than anyone on the team (aside from Harry) as Seeker, so everyone agreed to the temporary shift. The team assured him that he was being stupid for thinking that they would let him off the team just because he missed a few games and that made Harry feel a bit better.

But Harry still couldn't bear to watch it. Conducting and watching the last practice session from the ground had been bad enough.

Harry's hand hit his head as pain erupted.

"Brooding, Harry?" said Voldemort.

Harry looked up and Voldemort backed out of the "flinch zone." "I guess. What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to cheer you up, of course."

"Cheer me up?"

"Yes," said Voldemort as he began to pace around the room. "So this is the Gryffindor Common room. Very cozy."

"Haven't you been here before?"

Voldemort turned to him. "Oh, no, Harry. I wouldn't know where to look for it from the outside, as I was never in Gryffindor and since I didn't know what it looked like, I couldn't apparate in here, could I?"

"Then how-"

"Because I didn't apparate to the room. I apparated to you," said Voldemort. "You see, I didn't quite believe that Sirius would actually ground you, so I had to come and see if your complaint was legitimate. I apparated to the grounds – oh, don't worry, I was well concealed," he chuckled. "Wouldn't want to cause a panic," he said. "When I didn't see you in the air or in the stands by your friends, I figured you would be off somewhere by yourself. So, I focused on you."

Harry watched Voldemort slowly move around the room, taking in little aspects of the room with a glance. Why would Voldemort want to cheer him up? Why would Voldemort care if Harry was brooding because Sirius had grounded him?

"So what were you doing before you started brooding?" said Voldemort

"Huh?" said Harry, startled from his thoughts. Voldemort indicated at the papers in front of him. "Oh, that. Divination homework."

"Not an easy subject. Nor is it a very precise branch of magic," said Voldemort. "This teacher of yours..."

"Professor Trelawney," said Harry.

"This Professor, does she have any ability?"

"Well not normally," said Harry. "But she did go into a trance after my final in my third year. She predicted that the servant of the Dark Lord would return to his Master. That he would go back before midnight. And well that was the night that Pettigrew – Wormtail – got away."

"Interesting."

Harry half expected Voldemort to continue on that subject. He didn't.

"Other than that, all she does is predict my death and one of my classmates clumsiness," said Harry. "Since both are highly probable, I wouldn't classify them as prediction."

Voldemort chuckled. "Always the cynic, Harry."

Another cheer echoed through the castle. It sounded as if the game had ended. A quick defeat. Harry felt humiliated already.

The pain increased in his head and he felt Voldemort's hand under his chin, holding his face up.

"I must go now, Harry," said Voldemort. "But I will see what I can do."

He let go of Harry's face. "I don't know what you think you could do," said Harry. "I-"

Voldemort's knuckles stroked gently down the side of his face, silencing Harry.

Voldemort spun away abruptly. "I have my ways, Harry," said Voldemort. "I have my ways."

"Oh," said Voldemort, reaching into his robes. "This might help. I'm told it has its uses." He tossed something at Harry then he was gone.

Harry looked down at his hands, which were clutching soft material. His Invisibility Cloak. Harry almost smiled.

"Harry," shouted Ron, as he burst through the archway. "We won!"

"We did?" croaked Harry, this seemed to reverse the effect getting his cloak back just had.

"Yes. Colin didn't get the Snitch, but we won by 10 points."

His team had won without him? They didn't need him? This brought Harry's dejection even lower than he thought possible.

The result was that he didn't sleep very well and when he joined Ron and Hermione at breakfast the next morning, he felt worse than miserable. He didn't think it could get much worse until they heard

people enter and several adults sat down at the teacher's table. He caught Sirius' gaze and Sirius smiled at him.

Harry felt like a knife had jabbed him in the back and he quickly looked away. He moved a lot of food around on his plate but none of it ended up in his mouth. Finally, he tossed his fork onto his plate. "I've got to get out of here," said Harry.

The entrance of the owl, stopped Harry from getting up. He had never seen a pitch black owl before. The owl soared across the Great Hall and flew directly to Sirius. Sirius untied the parchment. The owl sat there.

Harry watched Sirius open the note looking curious then surprised. But when he began to read, his expression changed. Sirius' eyes widened and his hand actually moved to his heart as if he were receiving devastating news. As if that knife that had stabbed Harry was being moved slowly into Sirius' heart.

Remus laid a hand on his shoulder, looking worried, and said something to him. Sirius ignored him. He closed his eyes, the parchment now crumbled in his balled fist. When he looked up, it was straight at Harry. His expression was filled with such stricken pain that Harry felt it was somehow his fault.

Sirius got to his feet abruptly and left the hall.

"Wonder what that was all about," said Ron.

"Sirius didn't take that letter very well," said Hermione. "Maybe you should go after him, Harry."

But Harry noticed as soon as Sirius left, the bird flew directly to him and presented his leg. There was another letter. Harry was afraid to open it. He was afraid it was going to be from Voldemort. He was right.

Well, Harry, I believe I've just taken care of your problem. If there is anything else I can do, don't hesitate to ask. You are under my protection now and not even Sirius will challenge my authority.

Harry started to shake. What had he threatened Sirius with? What did he say to him that would make Sirius look like that. Just what the hell-

"Harry, are you all right?" said Hermione.

"No." Harry got up and moved toward the doors. He had to talk to Sirius. He was intercepted in the Hall.

"This way, Potter," said Snape, as he grabbed Harry by the cloak and dragged him towards Dumbledore's office. The door was open and they moved through and took the moving staircase to Dumbledore's office. Voices were raised from within.

"He's starting to get nasty," said Remus.

"Calm down, Remus," said Professor McGonagall.

"No, look at him. If I got a letter like that, I'd be sick too."

"It's all part of the plan," Professor McGonagall went on. "And if you'd be-"

Snape cleared his throat loudly as he pushed open the door, which had stood slightly ajar. Remus was pacing the office, McGonagall sat in the chair before Dumbledore's desk and Dumbledore sat behind it. Sirius was standing before the window, his arms crossed over his chest, staring out. He looked at Harry briefly then turned back to the window.

He still looked staggered. As if he had been hit in the stomach with a Bludger.

"Harry," said Dumbledore, "You were sent another note from Voldemort, were you not?"

"Yes."

"Let me see it."

Harry handed Dumbledore Voldemort's letter. He read it and nodded. "We thought correctly," Dumbledore told Remus. "He thinks that what he has told Sirius will lift Harry's restrictions."

"What is going on?" said Harry.

"Harry," said Remus, "Sirius was very hard on you because we had to insure that Voldemort believed you were miserable."

"Why?" said Harry.

"To see what he would do," said Remus. "He came to you during the Quidditch match."

"So, I was feeling miserable."

"Don't you see," said Remus. "He-"

"That's enough, Remus," said Dumbledore. "Harry, you may leave now."

"NO," shouted Harry. "Someone tell me what's going on! What did he say to Sirius? Why does he have to think I'm miserable?" Harry felt someone grab his arm and drag him toward the door.

"It's too soon for you to know, Harry," said Dumbledore. "You're not ready."

"Damn it, yes I am!" shouted Harry. "Tell me!" But Snape had all ready dragged him out of the office, closed the door and was ushering him out passed the gargoyle. Harry stared at the gargoyle with frustration

"Well I think the answer is obvious," said Hermione.

Both Ron and Harry stared at her. Hermione always thought everything was obvious. But then again, everything usually was to her.

Harry had just told them everything and they sat quietly talking in front of the fire in the common room.

"So are you going to sit there looking smug or are you going to tell us," said Ron.

Hermione looked up at Harry. "They're fighting over you," she said.

"What do you mean?" said Harry.

"I had a neighbor. When her parents got divorced they did the same thing," said Hermione. "Both trying to show her that they were better. Both attacking each other with taunts and innuendo. Look at the scene in the Great Hall on Halloween. It was a power play. Then he makes Sirius upset about punishing you. Then he takes credit for you not being punished anymore." Hermione looked at Harry. "You're aren't by the way. Punished anymore. I heard it. But it wasn't because of You-Know-Who."

Harry considered that it made sense. But... "Why?" said Harry. "And why are they making it so public? Everything is in front of crowds of people."

"That I don't know," said Hermione.

"I've got to find out," said Harry. "This is going to drive me nuts. But no one will tell me anything."

"What about You-Know-Who?" said Ron.

"Oh, no," said Hermione. "I don't think you should ask him, Harry. He might get mad or suspect something."

Harry nodded, thoughtfully. "Malfoy," he said suddenly.

"What? That's nutters," said Ron.

"No, I mean it," said Harry. "He's always boasting about how much his father's knows and he's been being nice to me since we poisoned ourselves. I'll ask him to ask his father."

"Do you really think you should trust Malfoy though, Harry?" said Hermione.

"Well what's the worst that could happen," said Harry. "He says no."

"I'm afraid of what will happen if he says yes," said Ron.

But Malfoy said yes and before the next potions class, Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle were waiting outside. Malfoy dismissed his two cronies with a wave and Harry nodded to Ron and Hermione and they went into the classroom. Harry and Malfoy moved away from the door and both looked around to make sure no one could hear them.

"You were right, Potter," said Draco Malfoy. "It's definitely a tug-of-war over you. And they are making sure it's public."

"Did you find out any of the 'whys'?" asked Harry.

"Only that it is believed by the entire wizarding world that whichever side has you will win," said Malfoy. "I tried to get more, but I think my father was getting suspicious."

"That's all right," said Harry. "You've at least confirmed some of my theories."

"And no one will tell you anything?" said Draco.

"No," said Harry not without irritation. "Dumbledore keeps saying I'm not ready."

"Well, I'd want to find out."

"I'm trying to, Malfoy," said Harry. "Why do you think I asked you. And I appreciate your help. I-"

Pain exploded in Harry's head and his hand hit his palm. He turned a full circle but saw no one else but Malfoy as the pain went away.

"What is it?" said Malfoy, also looking around.

"I-" Pain interrupted again, then went away. "He's calling me," said Harry. "He must have found out."

"You want me to tell Snape?" said Malfoy.

Harry was sure he had never seen concern of any kind in Draco Malfoy's face, but he saw it now. "Would you?"

"Yeah, I don't think he'll doubt me about this," said Malfoy.

Harry pulled out his wand and stuck it in his bag, then handed it to Malfoy. "Just dump this at my station and tell Snape I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Sure. Good luck."

Harry's hand hit his forehead again as the pain signaled again. Voldemort was getting impatient. "Thanks, Draco."

Harry closed his eyes. *This is going to be another nightmare.*

Voldemort was before him.

"What kept you, Harry?"

"I had to make excuses from class, Voldemort," said Harry. "I can't simply vanish without telling someone I have to leave."

Voldemort chuckled. "That pleases me, Harry. When I call you, you have accepted that you *have* to come."

Harry bristled over that one. "Did you *signal* me to discuss semantics? Or is there something else?"

"Oh yes, Harry. There is something else. A matter of great importance. A matter I had all ready thought was settled between us, which is apparently not."

That didn't sound good to Harry. Voldemort took a step into the flinch zone, which Harry surmised was to keep Harry quiet.

"Did I not tell you several times that when you had questions, you should come to me and I would answer them?" said Voldemort.

Harry nodded, his gaze caught in the bright red ones that didn't look as pleased as they were when Harry first got there.

"Then why did you feel the need to circumvent my generosity by asking someone you dislike to investigate through one of my Death Eaters?"

Harry opened his mouth, but Voldemort took a hold of his chin. "Is it because Dumbledore will not tell? Because Sirius will not tell you? Because, in fact, no one but me has told you anything at all this year?"

Harry could only nod his head.

"But Harry," said Voldemort, apparently interested in holding this conversation by himself. "As I am the one who has been the source of your information and I did tell you that I would satisfy that curiosity of yours, why didn't you come to me? Why didn't you ask me?"

To Harry, it sounded as if Voldemort sounded – well hurt.

Voldemort let go of Harry's face and stepped back. "I will hear your answer now, Harry," said Voldemort. "Why didn't you ask me?"

Why did Harry feel so guilty all of the sudden? "I-I didn't think you would tell me."

Voldemort continued to stare into Harry's eyes, as if trying to read his mind. "Why? When I told you I would tell you anything you wished to know. Why? When, as you put it yourself, there has to be trust between us. Why? When I have offered you everything I have, all my knowledge, all my experience. Why do you shun my generosity?"

Harry felt the same way as he did when Sirius looked up after reading that damned letter and almost choked. "I-I'm sorry," was all he could say.

Voldemort took a step closer and examined Harry's expression. He appeared satisfied.

"Good boy," he said and indicated Harry's chair. "Sit down. I will tell you."

Harry sat down as Voldemort settled into his own chair by the fire.

"I'm sure you may have figured much of this out on your own soon enough, but between your friend Ron worrying over the small points and your friend Miss Granger overloading you with too much information, I'm afraid your theories would come out rather deranged when everything is really quite simple," said Voldemort.

Harry had to say something about Voldemort, he certainly knew how to entice an audience with his speeches. He had seen it last year when Harry saw him address his Death Eater then several times again, when Voldemort had explained things to Harry.

"As you have deduced, Dumbledore and I are indeed having a very public possession issue over you. But of course, you want to know why," said Voldemort. "Am I correct?"

"Yes."

"So let me ask you," said Voldemort. "What is the first thing that comes to your mind?"

"More questions," said Harry.

"Ah, very good. Like what?"

"Like what does he want me do?"

"Why do you ask that?

"Well after the Triwizard Tournament," said Harry. "Dumbledore said "...and now we know what we have to expect..."

"Yes, and," said Voldemort.

"Well, I got the impression he expected something of me," said Harry.

"Very good, Harry."

"Then why won't he tell me?" said Harry. "Why aren't you telling me? You said you would."

"Harry, calm down," said Voldemort. "You will know everything you need to know when we are done. But *you* will figure it out. That way I can't be accused of telling you."

"Why wouldn't you want to be accused of telling me?"

"Oh, Harry, don't be silly. It is simply more fun this way."

Harry stared at him. He imagined Voldemort would look at it that way.
"So, what is it I'm expected to do?" said Harry.

"Well, to find your answer, we must examine the past and the connections between the two of us," said Voldemort. "During my first reign of power, the entire wizarding world was terrified of me. The most evil lord of the century was killing all the most powerful wizard unless they would join him. Everyone, except for my loyal followers, wanted me dead. When I started going after the heirs, everyone was even more afraid.

"That's where you come in, Harry. I failed, as you are well aware. And I have failed every other time I have tried to kill you since you've found out that you are the wizard you are."

"So, you think that Dumbledore thinks I can defeat you again?" said Harry, a little confused.

"Oh I'm sure that the entire wizarding world thinks that," said Voldemort. "I believe it myself."

"You do?" said Harry.

"Harry, you're jumping ahead," said Voldemort. "Think about the connections between us. Your mother's sacrifice was the most purest sort of magic there is. In retrospect, even I can admire her for it."

Harry sort of liked hearing that.

"But it left it's mark on you and cursed me to that oblivion that I resided in," said Voldemort. "Then when I returned to my body that night at the graveyard, I used your blood. Do you remember, Harry?"

Harry nodded.

"Now I can touch you without hurting myself," Voldemort went on.
"But my touch puts you in agony."

"I could always feel when you were near me," Harry pointed out.

"Yes, but I believe the potion I used with your blood made it worse," said Voldemort.

Harry made a quick connection. "And you used Wormtail's hand."

Voldemort looked at him. "Yes," said Voldemort. "Go on."

"Well," said Harry. "You used his flesh and my blood. Dumbledore said there was a bond because I saved his life."

"Yes, we spoke of this after Wormtail brought Ron to me." Voldemort stared over the fire at Harry, his red eyes glowing all the more. "The connection grows ever stronger between us," said Voldemort softly.

"I don't understand," said Harry.

"Don't you Harry? You are directly responsible for bringing me back to power. You saved Wormtail, who became my servant. If I had actually hit you with the Killing Curse that night, you would have ended up with another scar and I would've ended up back in that oblivion."

"So what does that have to do with what Dumbledore expects me to do?" said Harry.

"I have just given you an example of what happens when one wizard saves another wizard's life," said Voldemort. "Or in your case a witch."

Harry stared at him. His brain was starting to hurt. Harry saved Wormtail, thusly Voldemort therefore Voldemort would die if he tried to killed Harry. Voldemort had tried to kill Harry but his mother had saved him... Voldemort had his mother's protection now... Harry's

blood was half his mother's blood... If Harry killed Voldemort, he would die too.

Voldemort was looking at Harry and seemed to notice the moment Harry had figured it out.

"What does the wizarding world want, Harry?" said Voldemort.

"They want you to die."

"And it order for that to happen, what must you do?"

"I have to die too," said Harry. Harry felt a little disconcerted. Well a lot. Actually he felt like he was going to throw up.

"Very grim, our perspective fates," said Voldemort.

Suddenly, Harry recalled something else. He was almost afraid to ask. Damn his curiosity. "You said you wanted something from me too." It was almost a whisper.

Voldemort frowned, as if he had not expected Harry to ask so soon.

"You told me you would tell me, Voldemort," said Harry. "I'm asking. What do you want me to do?"

"Harry, when you do join me, we will share great power," said Voldemort. "But there is one wizard that stands in my – our – way. I can not defeat him alone."

Harry stood up slowly. He could only stare at Voldemort. Those red eyes stared back.

"Dumbledore," rasped Harry. His entire body had gone numb. "You want me to kill Dumbledore."

Voldemort settle back into his chair. "When you are ready."

Chapter 8

Hiding Out

Harry stared at the door to the potions dungeon. He had to get his stuff but he couldn't stay. Not with his stomach retching the way it was. He had left Voldemort soundlessly after that last disclosure and now needed, *had to*, as if his life depended on it, talk to Dumbledore.

Harry knew the truth now. All of it.

Everything seems to happen to you, doesn't it.

Hagrid's words. Harry couldn't agree more at this moment and seriously hated his own name.

He pushed open the door and walked like a zombie to Snape's desk.

"I'm sorry, sir," said Harry. "May I be excused from class. I need to see the headmaster."

Harry felt more than saw Snape study him. "How much did he tell you?" said Snape very softly.

"I hope there isn't anymore," said Harry in a voice he didn't recognize as his own.

"Very well," said Snape.

Harry turned and went to his station to get his backpack, which Draco had left for him. He caught Ron's gaze. Ron looked startled.

"Harry, you ok?" he said.

"No," Harry admitted and left.

Harry moved through the castle. Echoes of the past seemed to reverberate around him. Voices from past decades, centuries, called to him. He couldn't understand so he kept walking. Peeve's whizzed by him and blocked his path. Harry walked right through him.

It wasn't until he was standing in front of the Gargoyle again that Harry's mind focused on where he was. The Gargoyle didn't cooperate though, so Harry cheated.

"Oh dear," said Dumbledore. "Seems I'll have to put a buzzer at my door to keep the heirs from apparating into my office whenever they see fit."

Harry didn't smile. He sat down in the chair in front of Dumbledore's desk and looked at him. Dumbledore's gaze traveled over Harry in that way that made Harry think nothing inside him was secret. The expression that came over the old wizard's face was a combination of outrage and worry.

"So, he's told you everything, has he?" said Dumbledore.

Harry looked into those blue eyes. "Tell me none of it's true," he begged.

"Harry," said Dumbledore with a patient sigh. "All Voldemort can tell you is predictions of what might happen. Remember what I told you about choices. All our choices effects so many other things it makes predictions (as well as Divination) imprecise. Things will happen... you will make the choices your destiny has set for you. But you can always chose another destiny."

That had Harry's head spinning. How many destinies could someone have? "But what about the prophesies?"

"Ah, you've heard about them. Have you read them?"

"No," said Harry.

"Prophesies are no more than ancient predictions which usually come true because people find a way to see events as it was told in these prophesies. Nothing more than that. Of course there are some very accurate ones but those are very old and don't concern you."

"Professor," said Harry.

"Yes, Harry?"

"He wants me to kill you."

Dumbledore appeared furious for a moment. "So he told you that too?" he said softly. "Well don't worry about it. If it is your destiny, then you will."

"But-"

"Harry, remember what I told you about death when we had to destroy the sorcerer's stone?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"Then do not worry about me," said Dumbledore.

Harry stood up, staring at the greatest man he'd ever met in his life. The greatest wizard in the wizarding world had just told Harry that he might have to kill him. Harry opened his mouth, could think of anything to say so he turned and moved to the door.

"Where are you going, Harry?"

Harry opened the door and turned. He hated being Harry Potter. He said the first thing that popped into his mind.

"I'm changing my name and moving to Bulgaria to play Quidditch with Viktor Krum," said Harry.

He rushed up to the tower and collected his stuff. He needed time. Time to think, time to sort out what he was going to do. He had to leave the castle.

Harry was rushing through the common room with his pack when he almost knocked down Ginny Weasley.

"What are you doing here?" they both said at once.

Ginny began an explanation but stopped when Harry picked up his Firebolt, which he had dropped when they almost collided.

"Harry, are you running away?"

"I just need some time to think, Ginny," admitted Harry.

"But they'll find you," she said. "As soon as you leave, they'll be out looking for you."

Harry looked at her. She was right. With the way they were fighting over him, the entire wizarding world would be after him.

"I'll need a disguise," he said distractedly.

"Don't use magic," said Ginny. "The aurors will see through it. And I'm sure Professor Moody will be sent out."

Harry looked down at Ginny. "Why aren't you trying to stop me?"

Her face turned red in a sort of becoming way. "Because you saved my life once. Because I know you are the bravest person I've ever met and if you said you need time to think then I think you need time to think."

"Then you won't tell anyone you've seen me?" said Harry.

"No, Harry, I promise I won't," said Ginny.

"Thanks, Ginny." He leaned down and kissed her cheek.

"Oh, Harry," she called behind him. He stopped at the portrait. "Lose the glasses and the scar," she advised him.

"Thanks, Ginny."

By the time Harry reached Diagon Alley, Harry knew what Ginny meant. He had to erase everything that was Harry Potter about him. The wizarding world didn't know he was a.w.o.l. yet so he was able to go into Gringotts and get some money, then he took a large portion of what he had withdrawn and exchanged it for Muggle money.

He bought a wizard tent (no need to abandon creature comforts), bought some potion supplies then headed back to the Leaky Cauldron. He almost got through it.

"Hey Harry," said Tom, the owner. "What'cha doing here?"

Harry's mind raced. "I've got one more Christmas present to get. It's for Hermione. There is this little book shop-"

"Ah, I see. Go on then."

Worked every time. Drop some sentiment, and people always fell for it.

Once on the streets of London, Harry made several stops. A drug store, an optometrist, and a camping supply store. Then Harry ducked into an alley, covered himself with the cloak and flew out over the city.

He found a nice little wooded area to pitch his tent and did so quickly, stopping only when he heard the rustle of leaves.

Turning, he saw the snow white owl perch on a tree branch nearby.

Harry took a deep breath, not even wondering how she had found him. "Hedwig, you startled me."

She hooted and looked down at him with what Harry could only call disapproval.

Harry sighed and turned back to his tent. Covering it with his cloak, he hurried inside, holding the flap open while Hedwig swooped in behind him. It was comfortable enough. He had everything he needed.

He started on his potion first because that needed time to simmer before he used it. Once that was done, he emptied his bags onto his cot. Doing what the lady at the cosmetics counter had told him, Harry applied the make up to his forehead and his scar was covered.

Somewhat surprised and pleased that the mark that made him Harry Potter was covered, Harry went over to the cauldron as soon as it bubbled and dipped a cup into it. He took a sip. After a minute, his hair grew 2 inches. He took another sip. His hair grew another 2 inches.

Satisfied, he grabbed the bottle of bleach and took off his shirt. After dousing his hair and rubbing his eyebrows with the bleach, he grabbed the box of hair dye. It was a medium shade of blond.

An hour later, Harry finished toweling his hair and brushed it back. He looked into the mirror. The only thing familiar about the reflection was the eyes. Harry wished he had had enough cash for the color tinted contact lenses but he had ordered a month's worth of the disposable ones and just didn't have enough to cover everything. Harry had to pick up the rest of his supply of lenses tomorrow.

Harry ran his hand through his long blond hair. His bangs were now long enough to tuck behind his ears exposing his scarless forehead.

"Well, Jack Taylor," Harry told his reflection, using the name he had used at the eye glass place. "Welcome to obscurity."

"If you say so, dear," said the mirror.

Harry didn't sleep that night. After all his worry about disguising himself, as soon as he laid down, everything else came back to him. He found he couldn't eat either as he tried to choke down some breakfast the next morning. As soon as he smelled the food, his stomach started retching.

"Great," said Harry.

Pain exploded in Harry's head and he turned a quick circle. The pain went away, then returned a few minutes later. Voldemort was signaling him.

Harry dug out his parchment.

Stop calling me Voldemort. I won't come. I need some time to think. And don't try to apparate to me because my disguise is quite good and you won't find me. Nor will Dumbledore.

I'm only asking for a few days to think. I don't think it's too much to ask.

Harry sent Hedwig with the note and it didn't take her long to return.

All right, Harry. You take your couple of days to think. I will not bother you. I am impressed though, because I did try to apparate to you and I couldn't find you. You must have disguised yourself well.

You might want to write to Sirius and Dumbledore and tell them that you are safe. I believe Sirius is quite beside himself.

I also believe that they have actually sent people to Bulgaria to look for you.

Harry actually wanted to laugh at that but his stomach wretched again, so he couldn't. Instead, he jotted down a note to Sirius. He was still notably irritated with Sirius, but he was the closest thing to a father that Harry had.

Sirius,

I'm fine. Please don't look for me because I'm in disguise.

Tell Ron that Bulgaria is a beautiful country, the Krum's are wonderful hosts and the Quidditch is great.

Harry

Harry sent off Hedwig with that note and returned to his next order of business, getting permission to stay. He had seen a house on the other side of the woods and didn't want to take the chance that he'd get into trouble. He walked up to the house and knocked.

A man, who looked in his mid sixties, flung the door open. "What do you want?"

"I'm sorry to bother you sir," said Harry, feeling that this was not going to go well, "But does your property include that small forest over there?"

"What if it does?" said the man.

"Who is it, dear?" a kindly woman's voice came from somewhere in the house.

"I don't rightly know," the man called back. "Who are you, boy?"

"Sorry, sir," said Harry. "My name is Jack Taylor. I'm doing some traveling before I start University and I was wondering if I could have permission to camp in your forest there. I can pay and I promise not to do any damage."

"Who is it, dear?" said the lady again although this time she stepped up beside him. She had a round face and a round body but her expression was kind and reminded Harry of Mrs. Weasley.

The grumpy man explained who Harry was and what he wanted and the woman looked thrilled.

"Oh, of course, of course, you may. What a nice young man," she was saying. "And so polite to come for permission. You must come in and have tea."

Harry thanked the Dursleys for his years with them because he managed to get through an hour of polite conversation dodging their questions and being a well mannered guest. To their credit, the Porter's were very nice (even Mr. Porter lost his grumbling while Mrs. Porter was around). They told Harry he could use a spot in the woods to camp as long as he didn't make a campfire, which Harry assured them he wouldn't – he told them he had a propane stove – and they refused to let him pay.

Harry left the house feeling as if at least something had worked out for him this week.

When he got back to his tent however, Hedwig was back.

Dear Harry,

Everyone is very worried. I don't know who took it worse, Sirius or Hermione. Everyone is looking for you so you can't hide forever. Between the aurors, Sirius and Moody, they'll find you. Please just come back.

Remus

Sirius was out looking for him too? The tea and snack the Porter's had given him wretched out of Harry's stomach. He didn't sleep again that night either. It seemed as if, the more he wanted time to think, the more he couldn't think. The more he tried to think, the more he got sick.

Harry dug out some parchment and a quill and quickly wrote to Ron.

Ron,

Meet me in the Shrieking Shack at midnight. I have to talk to you.

Harry

He sent Hedwig off with the note and looked down at his hands.

He heard voices in his head:

You're a great wizard, Harry.

Do you know how much strength you've just shown?

Can you see how powerful he will be?

Harry didn't feel like any of it applied to him. He was alone again, hiding again and his only friends were miles away. He didn't even know if Ron would get his note.

Harry apparated into the Shack and saw Ron.

"Ron," said Harry.

"Harry." Ron spun around. "Where are you?"

"I'm using the cloak. Just listen-"

Footsteps pounding up the stairs stopped Harry. He sighed. "Ron, you were followed."

"No, Harry. I swear, I wasn't."

The door burst open. "Ron, is he here?"

"He was," Ron told Sirius. "I thought you were out looking for him."

"I came back to tell Albus that he was right," said Sirius, scanning the room. "That Harry did go to the bank."

"How did you find me?" said Ron.

"Dumbledore said you got a note from Harry. He was watching the Marauder's Map," said Sirius. "Harry?" Sirius circled the room.

Harry kept himself behind Ron. Whether or not Ron knew he was still there, Harry didn't know. Harry dropped a hand onto Ron's shoulder.

"Sorry, Harry," said Ron.

Sirius looked up then around the room. "Harry, talk to me." His voice sounded pained.

"First Quidditch, then my best friend," said Harry. "Thanks Sirius."

What a nightmare. Harry apparated back to his tent again. He was looking forward to another sleepless night with an empty stomach.

Harry strode down the main street of Hogsmeade the next day. No one glanced his way. He looked like any of the other poorer adolescents of the area who resided in Hogsmeade. He had bought a second hand robe, which was even worse than Remus Lupin's used to be.

He went into The Three Broomsticks, ordered a Butterbeer and sat down at a table. Sooner or later, someone would come in that Harry could ask when the next Hogwarts weekend was.

Harry's blood ran cold. Hagrid entered with Mad-Eye Moody. Harry stared into his mug. This was it? The big test. Either Moody would see through his disguise (although Harry couldn't see how as there was nothing magical about it) or Hagrid would recognize him.

Harry stood up and walked over to them.

"Doesn'a surprise me," Hagrid was saying. "'Arry's a smart boy."

"Can't hide from me," said Moody.

"Excuse me," said Harry, relieved for once. All the retching he had been doing had made his voice deeper than it usually was. Hagrid turned to him.

"Can I 'elp you there?"

"I was just wondering," said Harry. "When is Hogwarts next visit here?" He stole a glance at Moody but Moody continued to look around. Apparently Moody had seen nothing amiss with Harry. Test one, passed.

"Not this weekend but the next," said Hagrid.

Harry forced a small smile. "Thanks. I met someone last time and I'd like to see her again."

That sentimentality worked again. Hagrid smiled.

"Ah young love." But then Hagrid looked at his eyes. "Do I know you?"

"I live here sir," lied Harry. "You may have seen me around. You're a teacher at Hogwarts aren't you?"

Harry knew the compliment would distract him. He was right.

"Yes, thanks to Dumbledore. Great man."

"Yes. Thank you sir," Harry said and promptly left. He stopped short half way down the block. A large black dog was sniffing a trail towards him. *Sirius*. Foreboding crept over him. He could hide from the aurors and Moody. But Sirius could smell him. He quickly ducked down an alley and apparated back to his tent.

Harry didn't think he could wait 10 days to talk to Ron. And even then didn't know how much time he'd have at Hogsmeade, so he decided on desperate measures.

He pulled out his quill again.

Voldemort,

I would like to talk to Ron. Sirius and Dumbledore won't let me. Will you arrange it for me? I'm not asking this as any infringement on our contract or for any illicit purposes. I'm asking you to do it as a favor to me.

You can say no, I will understand. Hedwig will wait for a reply.

Harry

Well it was simple and to the point. No begging. Harry sent Hedwig with the note. She came back the next day.

Harry, haven't I told you that you only had to ask me and if it was in my power, I would do it? I even left a note telling Sirius how terrible it was that he wouldn't let you talk your best friend.

Needless to say, Ron is here now, waiting for you. Come whenever you are ready and I will let you talk to your friend.

Harry could just assume what kind of note Voldemort had left when he stole Ron out of the castle. He just hoped that Ron went along willingly.

Harry materialized next to the cage and studied Ron. He looked totally relaxed. He wasn't tied up. He had a plate full of food next to him.

"Ron," whispered Harry."

Ron jolted to alertness. "Harry? Is that you?" he whispered back.

"Yes. I'm under the cloak."

"You sound weird," said Ron.

"I have a sore throat," Harry said the first thing that came into his mind.

"What's going on, Harry?" said Ron.

"He's coming, Ron. Be quiet," said Harry.

Ron started shoving food in his mouth to keep himself quiet and Harry had to admire him. Harry couldn't ask for a better best friend.

"Harry," said Voldemort. "I know you're here. I saw your friend's reactions. Show yourself."

Voldemort was on the other side of the cage, scanning the perimeter around the cage.

"Tell him I don't want anyone knowing my disguise," whispered Harry to Ron.

Ron told Voldemort.

"But I'd like to see this disguise that has the wizarding world baffled," said Voldemort. "Come on, Harry, show me." Voldemort started around the cage and Harry backed away from him. "I can make you, Harry. You know I can."

"How?" said Harry.

Voldemort touched the tip of his wand to his forehead and pain exploded in Harry's head. Harry's cry drew Voldemort's attention to his precise spot. Harry knew that Voldemort couldn't see him, but he knew where he was.

"Come now, Harry," said Voldemort. "I want to see this brilliant disguise of yours and you want to speak to your friend – and I'm guessing you want to speak to him alone." Voldemort continued to walk around the cell. "I have done this 'favor' for you. Show me your cleverness."

Harry knew he'd never get to talk to Ron alone now unless he complied. He pulled off the cloak. His blond hair tasseled in the process as it fell around his gaunt face.

"Blimey, Harry," said Ron. "Is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me," said Harry, but he was watching Voldemort as he rounded the last corner of the cell to stand before Harry.

"Bloody brilliant," Ron added.

"Indeed," said Voldemort as his red eyes scoured Harry's face. From his overly long blond hair to his glassesless eyes, to his scarless forehead.

Harry flinched as Voldemort got close. "It's still there, Voldemort."

Voldemort reached out a hand and held it under Harry's chin, not touching him, just close enough to keep Harry's face up to his view. "Your friend is correct, Harry. It is brilliant. Only wizards raised as we were would know how to hide from the wizarding world."

"I walked down the main street of Hogsmeade, talked to Hagrid in front of Moody and walked down Diagon Alley without anyone giving me a second glance."

Harry wasn't boasting, it was the truth. His voice was the clincher because it was so messed up. He didn't know if he could get passed Remus or Sirius with his eyes, but he hadn't met them yet.

"I don't see it?" said Ron.

Voldemort cast him a look. "Look closely, boy. Harry has used Muggle tricks to hide from the wizarding world. So even the best aurors and Mad-Eye Moody wouldn't know him."

Voldemort lifted a free hand toward his face (the other was still beneath his chin holding his face up). "He used Muggle make-up to hide the scar, discarded his glasses for Muggle contact lenses – I would have used colored ones myself."

"I didn't have enough currency on me or I would have," said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. "And he used Muggle hair dye." Voldemort grabbed a strand of his hair. "How did you grow it?"

"That was the only magic I used. I used a potion," said Harry. "I keep telling Snape I pay attention in his class, but he doesn't believe me."

Voldemort smiled. "That potion didn't put that sunken look in your face," Voldemort said more seriously.

"No, you did that," said Harry.

Voldemort lowered his hands from Harry's face. "All right, Harry." The cage door swung open. "Go and talk to Ron."

Voldemort left and Harry turned as Ron jumped out of the cage.

They walked towards the woods and by the time Harry had unloaded everything on his chest, Ron looked as sick as Harry felt.

"Harry," said Ron, not without meaning. "I'd go with plan B at this point."

"I'm considering it," said Harry, seeing passed Ron's joke to the grimness of the situation. "I need your help."

"I'm here."

"Hermione's too," said Harry. "Don't tell her everything I've told you."

"Are you mental?" said Ron. "She'll throw a gasket."

"I know but she's the brain. I need her to look up stuff."

"Ok," said Ron. "What do you need us to do?"

"Look up everything on this rivalry between Salazar and Godrick," said Harry. "Also everything on the Wizard's code of Honor, especially the life saving thing."

Ron had a look on his face as if he was committing this to memory and Harry felt a rush of gratitude.

"Lastly," said Harry. Ron looked at him. "Help me find another way."

"We will, Harry," said Ron. "We will."

"Good," said Harry, clearing his voice, which had broken up. "I'll contact you during the next Hogsmeade weekend. Don't stay in one place too long so I can find you, ok."

"Will do."

"Thanks, Ron. I don't know what I would do without you."

Ron grabbed Harry by the shoulders and stared into his eyes. There was a wealth of meaning in that stare. "Well, it isn't easy being Harry Potter's best friend, but someone has to do it."

Harry read through that flippant statement. Ron had so much as committed himself to Harry just as Sirius and Remus were committed to Harry's father.

"Thanks, Ron," Harry managed. "And the name is Taylor. Jack Taylor."

"Ah, plan B," said Ron. "Ok Jack. See in Hogsmeade."

Harry's friends... *the only thing that wasn't a nightmare.*

Harry was staring into his mirror in his tent. His roots were starting to grow out. Now at least he had something to do tonight. He had to touch up his hair.

Chapter 9

Acceptance

By the next weekend, Harry knew he had to go back to Hogwarts. He couldn't figure out any other way of righting what he had made wrong (and he did consider it was his fault) without the school's resources or without Ron and Hermione's help.

Harry stood against a wall in front of a store in Hogsmeade watching Ron and Hermione move from store to store, just waiting for the right minute to approach them. He also kept one eye out for a large black dog.

They were being marked. He could see Moody down the block watching them and Remus was very closely going into every story they did. Harry didn't know what to think. Did these people care about him? Or were they only concerned that the one who had to die to save their world was on the run?

Harry dismissed that last question and strode toward Ron and Hermione. When he fell into step beside Hermione, she barely gave him a glance.

"Do you mind," she said indignantly. "We're having a private conversation."

"Good," said Harry. "Say my name, Hermione and I'll see that you're expelled. What did you find out?"

"Hey, Jack. How are you doing?" said Ron.

"Jack?"

"Keep walking," said Harry.

"There's too much to tell you," said Ron.

"OK, that's all right. I'm coming back to Hogwarts. I should be back tomorrow. I'll be talking to Dumbledore today. If he lets me back in we can talk about it tomorrow."

Hermione was staring at Harry's profile as if he was a complete stranger.

"Keep looking. I need all the information I can get."

"We will," said Ron. "Remus is coming," he said under his breath.

"See you tomorrow," said Harry and he strolled away.

Harry stared at the Gargoyle. He wasn't sure what he was going to say to Dumbledore, nor did he know if he could even get in to see him. Should he cheat?

"Can I help you?"

Harry cringed. He would have to think fast now.

"I thought I knew every student in this school," said Dumbledore.

"My name is Taylor. Jack Taylor," said Harry. He wasn't willing to talk freely out in the corridor.

"Come in, Mr. Taylor. Come in," said Dumbledore as he ushered Harry into the office and up the moving staircase to his office. "Sit down," Dumbledore said as he settled behind his desk.

Harry couldn't sit. He grasped the back of the chair and noticed that Fawkes had noticed him. He tried to ignore the phoenix.

"So what can I do for you, Mr. Taylor?"

"Professor, I'd like to come back to school," said Harry?

Dumbledore looked up at him and finally caught Harry's gaze. Dumbledore gave him one of his probing looks. "Do I know you?"

Harry didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "You do, sir."

Fawkes took that moment to leave his perch and he landed on the back of the chair by Harry. He looked up at Harry, then laid his head on Harry's chest.

Harry looked up again at Dumbledore and couldn't help the tear that gathered in his eye.

Dumbledore stood up, staring at his bird, his head on Harry's chest and the watery green eyes that stared at him.

Harry's hand went around Fawkes as Dumbledore rounded his desk and walked towards him. Fawkes made a wonderful sound.

"Harry?"

"It's me, Professor," choked Harry.

The phoenix was now crying into Harry chest. Tears were streaming down Harry's face.

"What have you done to yourself, Harry?" said Dumbledore, moving closer.

Fawkes' tears were starting to hurt as they fell on his chest. Harry couldn't push the bird away.

Harry's arms wrapped around the bird as he hit his knees. "Make him stop, Professor," cried Harry. "I know it's my fault. I know it."

Fawkes dug his claws into Harry's stomach, crying into his chest.

"Harry, it's not your fault," said Dumbledore.

Harry was breathing hard. Helpless tears were running down his face in response to Fawkes' tears. "It is!" he shouted.

"It's not," said Dumbledore.

Dumbledore was leaning over him. Harry was on the floor, the bird on his chest, still crying, still clutching at his stomach.

"Harry, let go of your guilt and Fawkes will let go of you."

"I am guilty," breathed Harry. "It's all my fault."

It was like a floodgate had opened on Harry's emotions. The moment Fawkes had attacked him, Harry had seen it all. From the moment he had saved Peter's life, everything was Harry's fault. Why couldn't he have just died when he one years old? Then he could be with his parents instead of living this nightmare.

"And what will you do?" said Dumbledore.

"I'll die," said Harry. "I'm ready to die." Harry was still breathing hard. He didn't recognize his own voice. "I'll die for you, but I won't kill for him."

"Harry, you don't know what you are saying."

"I do," said Harry.

"You aren't ready," said Dumbledore.

Harry sighed. "You keep telling me that."

"Harry, are you in a great rush to face your destiny?"

"Not particularly."

"Then don't," said Dumbledore. "You have plenty of time. Don't rush fate. It will get here when it gets here."

"That doesn't make me feel any better," said Harry. "Everything is still my fault."

"Haven't you been paying attention to Fawkes?"

Harry had won the emotional struggle with the bird but Fawkes was still clutching Harry and crying into his chest. "He's a little hard to ignore" said Harry

"His tears didn't work on you," said Dumbledore. "You still feel guilty. You are too strong."

Harry stared at him. "Explain."

"Harry-

"Oh, never mind," said Harry with frustration as he got up. He cradled Fawkes who was still crying in his arms and passed him to Dumbledore. "So may I come back to school?"

"Of course," said Dumbledore. "Did you think I wouldn't let you come back?"

"I've learned not to take anything for granted, but thank you," said Harry, feeling strange again. "I will get my stuff and return."

"And you have to see Voldemort again," said Dumbledore.

"Yes," said Harry. "I have to make sure the contract is still in order."

"Harry?"

Harry turned from the door.

"Lose the disguise before you come to Hall for the feast."

Harry nodded absently and looked at the ground. The nightmare, which was his life flashed through his head and he found himself staring into the fire in Voldemort's compound.

He looked up. Lucius Malfoy stared back at him. "I have to see-"

A ham like fist hit him in the ribs again and Harry felt the crack.

"An intruder," said someone.

"They found us," said someone else.

"It's me," said Harry, forgetting that he didn't look or sound like Harry Potter. "It's Harry-"

Lucius' fist hit him in the face and a gag instantly silenced him.

Harry looked around. Voldemort again was no where to be seen. Great.

"A spy," said one of the Death Eaters.

Speculation was being thrown about as to his worth as a spy and whether they should alert the "Master" to this new development, when Voldemort's voice rose from his tent.

Harry couldn't look up. He was doubled over. Hamfist had broken more than one rib this time. Harry felt the blood dripping down his face. Lucius had a nasty right jab too, he guessed.

Harry was still on his feet because two men (Crabbe and Goyle more than likely) were still holding him up.

"My Lord," Harry heard Malfoy say several meters away. "We discovered a spy. They have found us."

"What are you talking about, Lucius? There is no way they could find us," said Voldemort.

"But a boy wandered into the camp," said Lucius.

"WHAT?" shouted Voldemort. "Where is he?"

This is going to be another nightmare, thought Harry as he was dragged over.

He lifted his head and his gaze met those red eyes.

"You imbeciles," said Voldemort. "Didn't he tell you who he was?"

"Master," said Lucius. "He tried to tell us he was Harry Potter."

"It is Harry, you idiot!"

Malfoy grabbed Harry's face and pulled it up. "But—" "Lucius, you fool. Did you think that he could hide from the entire wizarding world – from ME – without his disguise being brilliant?"

"I suppose not, my lord," said Lucius, his eyes still searching Harry's face.

"Look at his eyes," said Voldemort. "You went to school with Lily Evans."

Lucius let go of Harry's face and Crabbe and Goyle dropped him. Harry hit the ground, but was more interested in what Lucius was saying.

"I only knew her because Severus did."

"Indeed," said Voldemort. He raised his wand and Harry's gag fell off him. "Are you all right, Harry?"

Harry stared at the ground. One word from him and Harry knew Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle would be in a lot of trouble.

"Yeah," muttered Harry, clutching in ribs.

Lucius helped him to his feet.

"I came to talk to you, Voldemort. Not to get beat up by your Death Eaters, again."

"So you are going back," said Voldemort.

"Yes."

Voldemort apparently didn't feel the need for privacy. "You're going to try and find another way?" said Voldemort.

"Yes," said Harry.

"Very well."

"Our contract-" said Harry.

"Ah, yes," said Voldemort. "Have no fear, Harry. I will still honor our contract as long as you do."

"Agreed," said Harry.

Harry apparated to the hospital wing and was treated. Mrs. Pomfrey treated him like a stranger. Not that she ever mis-treated him as

Harry Potter. But as Jack Taylor, Harry felt like he was being treated like his injuries weren't his fault. As if he were a normal boy.

He walked out of the Hospital Wing, his ribs repaired although still sore and the cut over his eye healed but still bruised. Several people glanced at him, but they seemed more interested in his robe than in him, himself. Considering it wasn't a school robe and the condition of it, Harry could understand.

A tall body blocked his path and demanded, "Why aren't you in uniform?"

It was Snape. "I just got back, Professor," said Harry and he tried to go around him. "I need to get changed."

Snape grabbed the back of his collar. "Don't dismiss me, boy," said Snape. "Another trouble maker. No doubt a Gryffindor brat."

A typical remark coming from Snape. This time, Harry looked up at him. "Yes, sir," said Harry.

Snape grabbed him under the chin to stare at him. Harry was starting to hate that.

"Harry?" said Snape, his eyes moving over Harry's face. They stopped at his eyes, which Snape stared into. "Incredible," said Snape.

"How did you know it was me?" said Harry.

"Lily's eyes," said Snape very softly. Then he let go of Harry and strode away, calling over his shoulder, "Go and get changed, Potter."

So Lucius wasn't lying. Snape knew Harry's mother. Harry continued to walk toward the tower. Snape must not have liked her either, judging by the way Snape treated Harry.

Harry stopped in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady and but the password had been changed.

"Just let me in," said Harry. "It's me. It's Harry Potter."

"I don't care who you say you are," said the Fat Lady, "I don't know you and you don't have the password."

"Is there a problem?"

Harry glanced up and saw Fred and George Weasley approaching. "Hi Fred, George," said Harry. "She won't open up."

"Well, obvious because you don't belong in Gryffindor Tower," said George. "Now move along."

"Oh, for crying out loud." Harry looked up at both of them. "It's me. It's Harry. Remember Harry Potter? You rescued me out of my window in your father's flying car which me and Ron wrecked. Remember the Triwizard Tournament, 1000 galleons worth of canary creams. You get it yet?"

"Blimey, Harry," said Fred. "It is you."

Since Harry could assume they never told anyone where they had gotten the money from, Harry could tell they were satisfied.

Not only satisfied. They looked impressed as they studied him.

"Ron said your disguise was brilliant, Harry," said George, "But this is astounding."

"Thanks," said Harry. "Can we go in now?"

Fred laughed. "Flubberworm," he said.

"The black eye is a bit much though, Harry," said George.

Harry didn't comment as the portrait swung open.

Fred grabbed Harry's arm and dragged him inside the common room.

"Look what we found outside," announced George as Fred presented him to the room.

Harry searched the room. Ron wasn't there and Hermione stood up from a chair, staring at him.

"So it was you?" she said as she slowly moved toward him.

"Yes, Hermione, it's me," said Harry.

She threw her arms around him and started crying. "Oh, Harry."

The rest of the occupants of the room converged on him, all filled with awe and questions. The commotion must have gotten Ron's attention. His voice came from the balcony.

"Harry?"

Harry looked up at him, and Ron raced down the stairs and pulled him away from Hermione to give him a quick hug. Then he pulled him away from the crowd. "Leave him alone!" shouted Ron. "He's been through enough."

Harry was soon seated in a chair by the fire filling Ron and Hermione in on everything else that had happened since Hogsmeade. They could swallow Malfoy attacking him but...

"Fawkes attacked you?" said Hermione.

"I was as surprised as you are," said Harry. "And he wouldn't stop crying on me."

"And it hurt?" said Ron looking incredulous.

"Yes."

"What did Dumbledore say?" asked Hermione.

"He told me to let go of my guilt and Fawkes would stop."

"But what does that mean?" said Ron.

"Well this whole mess is my fault," said Harry.

"Oh, Harry. How can you think that?" said Hermione.

Harry stared at her. "How can I not?"

"Even if you hadn't saved Peter," said Hermione, "You-Know-Who would have just found another way back to power."

"But I did save him," insisted Harry. "And that is the connection which both Voldemort and Dumbledore are using against each other."

Hermione looked back and forth between them. "What am I missing?"

Harry ran a hand through his hair and looked at Ron. He nodded and Ron delicately told Hermione the whole of it.

Hermione stood up abruptly, staring down at Harry as if he were an alien. "Well that just won't do," cried Hermione. "That's why you wanted me to look up all that stuff?"

"Yes," said Harry. "To find another way."

"Well that's what we'll do then," declared Hermione.

They went down to dinner listening to Hermione muttering about how she wasn't about to allow Harry to die, especially since *that woman* (meaning Trelawney) predicted it. Harry got only a few curious glances because of the company he was with, but when he got to a seat he noticed Dumbledore looking at him. Then he remembered that he was still in disguise.

"ere now," said Hagrid, who had seen who Dumbledore was looking at. "Tha's the boy who asked me when the next Hogsmeade weekend was."

"Hi, Hagrid," said Harry.

"Mr. Potter, I thought-"

"I didn't have time, Professor," said Harry quickly. "I'm sorry. It's going to take a little time."

Hagrid looked from Dumbledore to Harry. "Harry?"

"It's me, Hadgrid," said Harry.

Harry saw Moody stand up and felt as that magical eye of his moved over Harry's face.

"Bloody, genius," muttered Moody.

Harry sat down self-consciously.

"Aw, let him have a spot of fun, Professor," said Fred. "Harry's due some of that."

Dumbledore glanced around the room. Everyone was murmuring and looking at Harry. "Quite so," said Dumbledore. "And now that the news is out, let the feast begin."

As the food appeared on the table, the smell hit Harry and he turned away from the table. He clutched his stomach as it contracted. He leaned his forehead on the palm of his other hand, feeling dizzy all of the sudden.

"What is it, Harry?" said Ron.

"Nothing," said Harry and was glad as several people came over and started asking him questions about his disguise. Harry appreciated every distraction he got, as people came and went. As long as he could keep from looking at the food, he was all right.

He was talking to Cho Chang who stood over Hermione when Hermione noticed Harry's empty plate.

"Harry, you really should eat."

"Move along, Miss Chang," said Snape as he moved behind Harry. "She's right, Potter. We can't have famous Harry Potter starving to death."

Harry looked up at him hesitantly. "I-I can't."

Snape held out a goblet. "Drink it," said Snape forcefully.

Harry choked on his first sip and started coughing.

"Blimey, are you trying to poison him again, Professor?" said Ron angrily.

"I didn't poison him the last time, Mr. Weasley, he poisoned himself," said Snape. "And why don't you shut up and mind your own business." Snape looked at Harry. "Drink it, Potter. It will help."

Harry managed to finish the foul concoction and Snape waited and watched as if to make sure he did finish it. Harry handed him back the goblet.

"Now eat!" said Snape.

Harry looked at the food and his stomach didn't retch. He managed to eat a fair amount before he heard a loud familiar voice.

"Where is he?"

"Sirius-" Dumbledore said.

"Where – is – he?"

"He looks mad, Harry," said Ron softly.

Harry was afraid to look.

Then he felt the grip at the back of his neck. He was pulled to his feet and away from the table.

"Sirius," said Dumbledore, as Sirius grabbed Harry's arm and started pulling him out of the Great Hall.

"No, Albus," said Sirius. "It has to be said."

Harry didn't like the sound of that. He still hadn't looked at his godfather yet, nor had Sirius looked at Harry. Sirius didn't stop until they were in the room Sirius was using, then he turned Harry around to face him.

When Harry looked up at Sirius, Sirius' expression went from surprised to shocked to appalled. Then he yanked Harry into his arms.

Sirius was hugging him so hard, Harry thought his back was going to break.

"Sirius"

Sirius held him away by the shoulders. "Do you know how worried I've been, Harry?"

"Sirius, I-"

"You should have come to *me*," said Sirius.

Harry's face fell. That was the same thing Voldemort had said.

Sirius shook him until Harry looked up. "Don't you understand, Harry? Can't you see?" pleaded Sirius. "Voldemort is trying to take you away from us. Away from me."

Sirius' voice had broken and he turned away from Harry.

When he turned back, he face was determined. "But I won't let him, Harry. I swear it. I *can't* let him." He grabbed Harry by the shoulders again and stared hard into his face. "I love you, Harry."

Harry stared at him. He had never heard that in his life.

"I've loved you since the first time James put you in my arms and you grabbed my finger, looking up at me with Lily's eyes."

Harry felt the burning in his eyes. Harry realized that when Sirius had found out that Scabbers was Peter Pettigrew, he had broken out of Azkaban (something no one has ever done) and avoided the Dementors, and came to the school to protect Harry. Then he came out of hiding again when he thought Harry was in trouble. Then when he knew it wasn't safe, he came and took Harry away from the Dursleys.

Sirius had been protecting him, just like his father would have.

Sirius moved away from him and came back, holding out two pieces of parchment. Harry was almost afraid to look at them.

The first one was the letter Harry had sent to Voldemort after he had been grounded. The second one was from Voldemort.

Chapter 10

Voldemort's plan

You were a bit harsh, weren't you, Sirius? Look at the words Harry wrote to me after what you did. Can you hear the bitterness? How much has the boy been deprived of growing up? How much more misery can be inflicted on him?

He takes it from me because he still considers me his enemy. But how much longer will he consider me his enemy when he is forced to accept the misery from you, someone he loves.

And I believe he loves you, Sirius, although I'm sure he hasn't told you. Does he even know how to say the words, Sirius? Has anyone taught him, shown him how? Have the words ever even been spoken to him?

Harry is coming to me now for answers. How long will it take?

Harry stared at the note. Sirius was right. Voldemort was trying to turn Harry away from Sirius and in essence, his own parents. Voldemort was manipulating every aspect of Harry's life to force Harry to keep going back to him. And Harry was letting him.

He looked up Sirius. There was an unreadable expression on his face, but his eyes were filled with tears.

“Don’t let him take you from me, Harry. I couldn’t bear it.”

“Oh, Sirius,” Harry cried as he flung himself back into Sirius’ arms. “I’m so sorry.” Harry was crying now too. “I do love you. I swear I do.”

“I know, Harry.” Sirius arms were strong around him and he let Harry cry. More grief and more guilt poured out of him.

How was he supposed to fight Voldemort now?

Harry returned to common room feeling worse than he had ever felt in his life. Apparently, it showed in his expression because no one said a word to him. Even Ron looked afraid to speak.

Ron helped Harry re-dye his hair black and Hermione put it back to its normal length and untidiness with a spell. Harry had decided to keep wearing the lenses. They were so convenient and he could actually see better with them in than he could with his glasses.

But after he washed the make-up off his face and looked into the mirror, the face that stared back still looked like a stranger to Harry.

Not surprisingly, Harry found himself standing outside Snape's office. The door was open and the light was on, but Harry hesitated stepping into the doorway. Harry's relationship with Severus Snape had become very obscure. In public, well in school that is, it was the same, but in private or in context with anything connected with Voldemort, Snape had almost assumed the role of his personal body guard.

"The heir can't sleep," said Peeves, wizzing down the hallway toward Harry.

"Shut up, Peeves," whispered Harry

"What's going on out there," Harry heard Snape from inside.

But Peeves continued to taunt Harry and bang things around. When Harry turned around again, Snape was standing before him.

“What is it, Potter?”

“I – er – can’t sleep,” said Harry.

“So you came here to steal stuff to make a potion?” sneered Snape, apparently back to his nasty self.

“Ah, no, sir,” said Harry. “I was going to ask you to make me one. I don’t know how to make one for dreamless sleep.”

“Bad dreams, is it?” said Snape, considering Harry thoughtfully. “Well come in then.”

Harry followed Snape inside his office. Harry’s experiences inside this particular office weren’t pleasant so Harry moved within it cautiously.

“Sit down, before you fall down, Potter,” said Snape as he collected several items from his case and set on his desk beside a cauldron. “You look exhausted. It surprises me that you aren’t comatose.”

Harry sat down in one of the chairs in front of Snape’s desk.

“And you really should stop torturing yourself over this,” said Snape. “This whole thing doesn’t revolve solely on you and Voldemort. There are many factors involved. Anything could happen.”

Harry considered Snape’s words. It was true. Voldemort could get sick or die of natural causes (sort of a stretch, but it could happen), the aurors could find them and take care of everything without him, Harry could fall off his broom during the next Quidditch match and die.

“And stop looking at me like that,” snapped Snape. “Where are your glasses?”

Harry looked at him with some surprise. “I see better with the lenses,” said Harry. “How was I looking at you?”

“Never-“ Snape stopped himself. He threw a couple more things into the pot, his expression one of concentration. As if he were struggling with himself. “Harry,” he said, still looking into the cauldron. “There was a lot more than jealousy of your father’s talent on the Quidditch field which led to our animosity towards one another.”

“Oh,” said Harry. Harry wasn’t sure he was going to like this. If Snape started disparaging his father, Harry knew he would loose his temper.

“Yes,” said Snape. “It was mostly because of your mother.”

“So you did know my mother, too.”

“Oh, yes,” said Snape. “Lily Evans was the most charming girl in the school back then. As well as the kindest.”

“So why did you hate her?” said Harry, becoming confused.

“Hate her?” said Snape and he finally turned to Harry. “I didn’t hate her, Harry, I was in love with her.”

Harry felt his jaw drop open.

“She liked me as well,” Snape went on. “Bugged the hell out of James. But Lily used to help me with Charms and Arithmancy and I helped her in Curses and Potions. Of course she was totally devoted to your father and I never told her how I felt, but that damned Sirius found out. That’s when he started playing all his little jokes on me. James laughed at them but your mother used to explode.” He looked at Harry. “That’s were you got that temper of yours, Potter, from your mother. As sweet as she was, she had a very short fuse. It never lasted and was always directed at James or Sirius, she never lost it with me, but it was nasty. It was that last trick that clinched it for her. After James saved me from the tree and from Remus, she didn’t speak to any of us for about a month. Of course she went back to James, but she didn’t resume our friendship.” Snape went on bitterly, “She considered that it would be safer for me, if she didn’t.”

Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Lily is also the reason I became a Death Eater," admitted Snape. "And why I became a double agent."

"What?!" Now Harry was astounded.

Snape continued to monitor the potion, throwing in various ingredients at specific moments. "Oh, yes," he continued, still not looking at Harry, as if the sight of him repelled him. "I knew they were after the Potters. I had to do something to save Lily, so I joined them. Voldemort was extremely pleased with me too, because, all modesty aside, I was one of the strongest wizards of our class."

Since in all honesty, Snape was an incredible teacher, Harry didn't doubt it.

"I didn't know who the spy in their circle was though. Everyone was convinced it was Sirius. I half doubted it, but I wanted it to be true, so I believed it too."

"But everyone was wrong," said Harry.

"Well, be that as it may, I'll always hate Sirius Black," said Snape.

"Because it was his fault you couldn't stay friends with my mother?" said Harry.

Snape went on, "And even though I begged Voldemort not to kill Lily, that she didn't need to die. That just the heirs were the target, he killed her any way."

"And everyone thought that Sirius had betrayed them."

"Yes," said Snape.

"But it wasn't the betrayal that killed her," said Harry with dawning. "It was me. She was protecting me," he said in a small voice. Harry looked up at Snape. Snape was leaning on desk

looking down at Harry with his arms crossed and a condemning look on his face. "That's why you hate me?"

Snape sighed and turned back to the cauldron. "I don't hate you, Harry," said Snape. "But that is why I keep you angry with me."

"I don't understand."

"Lily was never angry with me," said Snape, dipping a goblet into the cauldron to fill it. "So I prefer to see you glaring at me through those glasses of yours rather than seeing her eyes looking at me the way they used to when I was explaining potions to her."

Snape moved in front of him and held the goblet out to Harry. Harry took the cup without looking up and drained it in one gulp.

Snape took the cup back but didn't move away. Harry started to feel the effects of the potion and looked up.

"She'd be proud of you, by the way," said Snape.

Harry had felt a bit better after talking to Snape but still needed potions to eat and to sleep for the next week. Ron and Hermione had been fascinated by Snape's story. Hermione looked as if she were going to cry at one point, she thought it was so sad.

The next Quidditch match was almost a joke. Harry had caught the Snitch so fast he thought the team would kill him because they barely had the chance to play but since no one had scored, Gryffindor was so far ahead on points Harry considered that it made up for it.

Harry and Ron left Trewlany's classroom and started toward the Gryffindor tower. Ron stopped Harry when Harry made a wrong turn.

“Harry, where are you going?”

“I have to go to the library and look something up,” said Harry. “Voldemort’s been signaling me all morning.”

“He’s calling you?” said Ron. “How?”

“He has his ways,” said Harry. “But as far as I know the only things I have to do under the contract is write to him once a week and return to his camp at the Christmas break. I shouldn’t have to go running every time he calls. I want to make sure that I’m right though.”

“Oh.”

“And ask Hermione if she could eat fast and give me hand.”

“Ok, Harry,” said Ron. “Go on. We’ll be right up.”

To her credit, Hermione found the exact section, article and paragraph that Harry needed. They were still feeling smug about it as they made their way down to Snape’s dungeon for double potions.

Harry’s hand hit his forehead.

“Another signal?” said Hermione.

Since the pain had been brief, Harry nodded.

“Maybe you should go,” said Hermione. “Isn’t the plan to make You-Know-Who think the plan is working?”

“The plan was working,” said Harry. “I’m not willing to participate in his games anymore.”

“So, what are you going to do?” said Ron.

“I’m going to class and hope that I don’t poison myself again,” said Harry.

Ron and Hermione followed him in.

Harry was half way down his list of ingredients when he found one he didn't know. He looked over at Ron's list and saw that Ron had a completely different list. Great, Harry thought.

"Problem, Mr. Potter?" said Snape.

Harry was beginning to think that Snape kept one eye on him at all times in his class.

"Er, yes, Professor," admitted Harry. "I don't recognize this ingredient and I noticed that Ron's list is different again." Across the room, he spotted Draco looking over at Crabbe's list with alarm. "I don't particularly feel like poisoning myself again."

"Either do I," said Draco.

Snape actually laughed and the whole class stared at him. "This is a test of course," said Snape. "You all have different potions. Now finish up so we can begin." He turned to Harry. "If you don't recognize an ingredient, look it up, Potter."

Snape looked back at his papers and Harry automatically reached out his hand. The reference book flew off the shelf and into Harry's hand.

"Ten points from Gryffindor for Mr. Potter's silly wand waving," said Snape without looking up.

Harry looked down at his hands. He didn't have his wand out. Ron noticed it too.

"But Professor," said Ron, obviously not being able to help himself. "Harry doesn't have his wand out."

Snape looked up at Harry. Harry bit his lip and shrugged apologetically. Then he turned to Ron. "Then we'll have to make them for Mr. Weasley's smugness and simply give Potter detention for showing off."

"Sorry, Harry," whispered Ron.

Harry didn't respond because pain exploded in his head. It didn't go away.

"Hello, Severus," said Voldemort.

Chapter 11

The Rebellion

The entire class reacted. They all looked around and jumped when they noticed who it was. Harry didn't have to turn around to see who it was. He slowly sat down and leaned his elbow on the table, his forehead still resting in his palm as he felt Voldemort step further into the dungeon.

Snape told the class to sit down, which they did as Harry could tell by the scraping of chairs.

"I'm trying to conduct a class," said Snape.

"I can see that," said Voldemort. "I won't take long. I just require a word with Harry Potter."

Harry finally looked up at Snape, who was standing at the front of the room. He could feel Voldemort's red eyes boring into the back of his head. Snape gave a very small nod to Harry.

Harry didn't get up or turn around. He shook his head. "There is nothing that I am required to say to him," said Harry.

"Harry, did you just say no to me?" said Voldemort in a dangerous tone, which Harry hadn't heard in a while.

"I did," said Harry. Harry felt the entire class staring at him and felt Voldemort take a step closer. One more step and he would be in the flinch zone.

"Perhaps you should heed some wise advice," said Snape, who still had Harry's attention.

Harry knew Snape was telling him to do what he was told. Not this time.

Harry finally stood up and turned around to face Voldemort. Sure enough, Voldemort's expression was less than pleasant.

"I am under no contractual obligation to speak to you until Christmas break," said Harry. "And you know I'm right."

Voldemort's glare was becoming quite menacing, but Harry stared defiantly right back at him.

"Harry's right," started Hermione. "Under wizarding contractual law, article 4, paragraph 6, section 17.3—"

"Shut up, Miss Granger!" shouted Snape.

Voldemort's eyes left Harry and turned to Hermione. His expression changed too, as if he had just changed strategies.

"So this is the notoriously clever Miss Granger," said Voldemort. Then his eyes started moving over the class, as if just noticing them. "Hello, Ron. Draco," he acknowledged. "You must be a Longbottom," he said to Neville who looked like he was about to pass out or throw up. "And Vincent, Gregory," he nodded at Crabbe and Goyle. He looked back at Snape. "Very interesting class you have assembled, Severus."

"Now that you've made a nice mental assessment of the class," said Harry. "Would you mind leaving?"

"Oh but I would mind," said Voldemort. He took the step into the flinch zone, his eyes moving over Harry's face. Harry could tell by Voldemort's expression that he knew something had changed since the last time he had spoken to Harry. He didn't look pleased about it either. "If you won't talk to me, maybe I can find someone who will."

He turned pointedly to Ron. "Care for a chat, Mr. Weasley?"

"You can't touch them and you know it," said Harry.

"I'm not talking about hostaging him, Harry," said Voldemort. "I just want to talk. Maybe your friend Ron is as curious as you usually are."

Harry didn't like this power play at all. Voldemort was trying to manipulate Harry again. Trying to make Harry do what Voldemort wanted him to do. He had to be strong.

"I doubt that Ron-"

"Hold on, Harry," said Ron. "I would like to hear what he has to say."

"Ron," said Harry.

But Ron stood up and walked around the tables to stand by them. He looked at Harry with an expression Harry had never seen, such was his determination.

"Very good," said Voldemort. He took Ron's arm, whispered something to him and they both disappeared.

The class was dead silent. Harry felt his stomach wretch and he rushed out of the room.

Harry had become so violently sick that when a 2nd year had found him on the floor in the bathroom, the poor boy was afraid to get near him.

"Harry," he heard Sirius call.

Harry lifted a miserable gaze to look at his godfather. "What have I done?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Harry, it's all right," said Sirius, helping Harry up. "You did the right thing. So did Ron. He's back all ready. Ron's fine."

Harry looked at Sirius. "Ron's back?"

"Yes, Harry," said Sirius. "Come on. Stop doing this to yourself." Sirius helped Harry to Sirius' room and sat him down.

“Blimey, Harry,” said Ron. “You look terrible. Don’t tell me you were worried about me?” Harry looked at Ron. He looked fine. Actually, he looked furious with Harry. “I read that contract thing as thoroughly as you did. Did you think I didn’t know what I was doing?”

“Sorry, Ron,” said Harry. “I’m just not used to—“ he glanced around the room. Only Remus and Hermione were with them. “To — well — caring so much.”

“Well, forget it,” said Ron. “It was great. He’s really worried, now. He’s not so confident now. And he actually looked like he didn’t want to upset me in any way.”

“What happened?” said Harry.

“He wanted to know why your weekly letters weren’t as ‘amusing’ - as he put it - as they usually were. And why you didn’t come when he called,” said Ron.

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him you had a long talk with Sirius and—“

“You didn’t tell him what we talked about did you?” said Harry.

“You didn’t tell *me* what you talked about, so how could I,” said Ron. “You only spoke about the plan.”

Harry nodded. “So is this good or bad?” said Harry, looking between Sirius and Remus.

“I’d say it’s good,” said Remus. “He’s going to be very careful with how he deals with you now, Harry.”

“Yes,” said Sirius. “He knows you’ve wavered. He’s going to have to see if he can sway you back.”

“It won’t happen,” said Harry fiercely. “I’m not going to listen to a word he says anymore.”

“Well, it won’t be that simple, Harry,” said Sirius. “After the Christmas break, and he tests you, then there will be no contract. There is no telling what Voldemort will do then.”

“What does Professor Dumbledore think?” said Hermione.

“Albus isn’t in on our little arrangement here, which is why he isn’t here,” said Sirius.

“What do you mean?” said Ron.

“Well Albus wouldn’t have agreed to tell Harry what Sirius told him,” said Remus. “So we didn’t tell him. I however agree that Sirius did the right thing, which is why I’m here.”

Harry looked back and forth between the two of them. He pulled out his wand and tapped his watch. “Commentary,” he said.

Mr. Prongs thinks that his son should listen to Mr. Padfoot and Mr. Mooney because they both love him as much as I do.

Harry held his breath and waited.

Mr. Wormtail believes that Mr. Padfoot is deluded from his time in Azkaban and knows that the master only has the best intentions for master Harry.

“What did Peter say?” said Remus.

Sirius actually laughed after Harry told them. “Oh, yes,” said Sirius. “Voldemort is worried all right.”

Voldemort didn’t show up at the school again but the Christmas Break was fast approaching. Harry continued to send him notes on how his grades were progressing but he still didn’t include anything personal. Voldemort had stopped writing Harry back too,

which Harry liked, although he did 'signal' Harry every once in awhile. It was usually during potions, which Harry attributed to the fact that Voldemort probably knew that the whole class would jump as soon as Harry's hand hit his forehead. That would amuse him.

When the first day of the break came, Harry paced Sirius' room. Both Ron and Hermione were forced to stay at Hogwarts, under Dumbledore's protection so they were both there as was Remus, Severus and Dumbledore.

"I can't do it. I can't do it."

"Yes, you can, Harry," said Sirius.

"I—" Harry stopped himself. Of course, he had to do it. Dumbledore was looking at him strangely and casting odd looks at Sirius and Remus as if he suspected something. Since Dumbledore didn't know what they were doing, Harry shouldered his backpack. He hugged everyone in the room, waiting until he got his kiss from Hermione, then stared at the floor.

Another nightmare.

Harry watched as Voldemort strode across the compound toward – well, toward himself. He couldn't believe it. Voldemort walked up to Harry Potter, stopping just out of the flinch zone and they started to talk.

This was just fine with Harry. If someone was stupid enough to impersonate him, then great. Harry was free. What a wonderful feeling. It didn't last. A gag went around his mouth and hands grabbed his arms.

He was dragged over to Voldemort.

"What do we do with the spare, Master," said the Death Eater.

Voldemort turned and stepped back, looking surprised at the two of them.

"Who are you?" said the Harry Potter who was there first.

“Well, this is a dilemma,” said Voldemort. He raised his wand and Harry’s gag fell off.

“Well, since you all ready have one, I’ll be leaving,” said Harry.

Ropes magically appeared around Harry’s hands so he couldn’t apparate. He looked up at Voldemort.

“Look, you only need one of us,” said Harry.

“Yes, it seems you have a surplus,” said the other Harry. “That lets me off the hook.”

That was exactly something Harry would say so Harry looked at the other Harry. It had to be Malfoy. He was the only one who would try something like this and know Harry well enough (aside from being informed by his father) to get away with it.

“Malfoy!” said the other Harry. “Are you crazy? He’ll kill you.”

Harry blinked at him.

“Is that what all the friendliness at school was since the duel was, to get me to let you close to me?”

“Well I guess you were right, Voldemort,” said Harry, “the guilty will damn themselves.”

“So you admit it?” said Malfoy.

“Sure,” said Harry. “Whatever you say.”

“I am not amused,” said Voldemort.

“Neither am I,” said Malfoy.

But Harry started laughing. He couldn’t help himself. Just like Snape said, *Anything can happen*. This was a little weirder than Harry expected but still...

“Well then, if you’ll just let me go, I’ll be out of the way,” said Harry.

“I don’t think so,” said Voldemort.

“Then let him go. He didn’t sound like he wanted to stay either,” said Harry.

“I have to stay,” sneered Malfoy. “I’m under contractual obligation until I’m tested.”

Harry’s jaw dropped open. He had forgotten about that in his amusement. Harry couldn’t leave either. Not legally.

Voldemort looked at Malfoy as if he had said the right thing, then turned to Harry. “So what do I do with you boy.”

“Well,” said Harry. “If you don’t believe I’m Harry Potter, then you could kill me. If you think I might be, you could try torturing me. But I would rather that you release me from my contract so I can go to Bulgaria.”

Voldemort stared at him.

“Where did you hear that? Hermione?” said Malfoy. “I didn’t think you would listen to anything she says. You hate anyone who isn’t pure blooded.”

Malfoy actually defending Hermione hit a nerve. Harry raised his bond hands. Voldemort grabbed one of Harry’s wrists and Harry’s knees hit the ground.

“One of you is a very fine actor and very stupid,” said Voldemort. “When I find out which one, I will see justice done.”

Voldemort had them both put in Sirius’ cage. Harry knew this was a good thing. Voldemort should have been furious, but the state of his position with Harry made him leery of doing anything to actually hurt him. If he had been intending to sway Harry back, this was not helping him.

“So what did you use?” said Malfoy. “Polyjuice potion? Where did you get my hair? The floor of the bathroom after Hermione cut it?”

Harry could tell that Malfoy was just giving him all the answers because Voldemort could still hear them. In fact, Voldemort had the cage moved closer to the fire so that he *could* still hear them.

Harry ignored both of them. Harry didn't want to talk to Voldemort anyway. This was the perfect opportunity to escape it. Harry couldn't leave, as Malfoy reminded him, because of the contract. But at least he didn't have to endure talking to Voldemort.

Harry surprised himself by being hurt that Voldemort couldn't see that Malfoy wasn't him, but then berated himself severely. That was what Voldemort would want him to feel. The resulting guilt caused Harry not to sleep that night. He dozed briefly in the early hours of dawn and when he woke up, he was alone in the cage.

Malfoy approached the cage when he noticed Harry was awake. "You lose," was all he said before he strode back toward Voldemort.

Harry wondered what Malfoy could've done or said to get Voldemort to believe he was Harry. Again he felt hurt and Harry shoved the feelings away. Good, fine. Maybe he'll kill me now and get it over with.

But Harry wasn't killed. He remained in the cage the rest of the day and that night being let out only to go to the bathroom. The next morning, Harry was leaning against the bars when he felt Voldemort approaching from behind him. When he hit the flinch zone, Harry said, "You can't sneak up on me, Voldemort."

Voldemort rounded the cage. Harry still had his eyes closed.

"Problem with your new toy?" said Harry.

"He doesn't seem as talented as he was the last time I tested him," said Voldemort.

"Maybe, he's having a bad day."

"He also doesn't seem as amusing as I recalled," said Voldemort.

“Too bad,” said Harry.

“He’s also too respectful.”

Harry opened his eyes and looked at Voldemort. Those red eyes stared back. “Really?” said Harry. “Well that is a real pity.”

Harry leaned against the bars again and closed his eyes, willing Voldemort to go away.

“Why do you think this is?” said Voldemort. “And why is the impersonator so flippant?”

Harry sighed. He still didn’t open his eyes. “Maybe your pet over there remembered that you killed his parents. Maybe he remembers you hunting him for the past few years. How you took his family away from him again this summer. How you’re manipulating his life to suit yourself. And as for the impersonator. Perhaps he doesn’t care.”

“Interesting,” said Voldemort and Harry felt him move away.

It was close to lunch and Harry was hungry. He kept staring at Malfoy, and Harry was convinced it was Draco, because no one else could’ve convinced Voldemort it was him except Malfoy. Draco was sitting by the fire reading. There was a pile of chicken on the table beside him and he was sitting in Harry’s chair.

Pain exploded in Harry’s head. Harry quickly looked around as it went away. Voldemort was signaling. Draco hadn’t moved. The pain exploded again and Harry’s hand hit his forehead because it didn’t go away quickly. He looked to the opening of Voldemort’s tent and found Voldemort standing there looking back at him. Voldemort lowered his wand and Harry’s pain went away. Then Voldemort looked towards Draco, who hadn’t moved, was still engrossed in whatever he was reading.

Voldemort started moving toward Draco, closer and closer. Draco didn’t move. *He’s got him*, thought Harry, feeling inordinately pleased.

Voldemort stopped directly behind Draco and Harry heard the cage door unlock. Harry went to it and jumped out. He went to the fire and Draco looked up at him. Harry sat down in one of the other chairs and started eating.

“Who let you out?” said Draco. Harry looked up and saw Voldemort’s hand fall on Draco’s shoulder.

“I did.”

Draco jumped.

“Told you that you couldn’t sneak up on me,” said Harry.

“Yes, and I should punish you for that hint.”

“Why?” said Harry. “Because you couldn’t figure out that Malfoy was playing you for a fool and I had to clue you in?”

The Cucacius curse knocked Harry out of his chair to the ground.

“As much as I missed your sarcastic wit, Harry,” said Voldemort. “I don’t appreciate it now.”

“All right,” said Harry, pulling himself back to the chair. “I’m sorry.”

“Good boy.”

Voldemort magically tied up the imposter then started to question him. He had one of his Death Eaters search him until they found the flask of polyjuice potion. At which point the fake Harry fell to his knees pleading with Voldemort.

“I rather like this,” said Voldemort. “Harry Potter at my feet, begging for his life.”

“I’ll ignore that remark,” said Harry. Harry was still eating. “So what are you going to with him?”

“Nothing until the polyjuice wears off,” said Voldemort. “He’s of little use until then.”

“You know who he is.”

“Yes, he has damned himself,” said Voldemort. “But punishment will be more effective when he returns to his normal form and when his father returns.”

Voldemort gagged Draco then had him put into the cage and Harry looked up.

“So what were you signaling me about anyway?” said Harry.

“Ah, that curiosity,” said Voldemort. “I’m glad you asked. I found a rare book and wanted to show it to you.”

“Can it wait until I’m done eating,” said Harry. “Being hit with the Crucius Curse takes a lot out of you.”

Voldemort chuckled looking very pleased. “All right, Harry. But it is a book of Prophesies. And I have found one that I believe refers to you.”

Harry’s eyes immediately met Voldemort’s. He grabbed the closest napkin and wiped his hands. “All right, Voldemort. You got me.” Harry stood up. “I’m done.”

Voldemort chuckled again. “How could I have not known that it wasn’t you.”

Harry shrugged and followed him inside his tent.

Harry woke up. He had slept fitfully and left his tent feeling good. He had the book of prophesies in his hand. The one Voldemort had shown him was vaguer than he would have liked, it

spoke of heirs rising to great power and the balance of power being restored, but he was curious to read some more of the book.

“Ah, good morning, Harry,” said Voldemort. “Hungry?

“Morning,” said Harry, staring at the food spread out. “Yes, I am.” Harry filled a plate and sat down in his chair. He opened the book and popped a piece of bacon into his mouth. Harry felt Voldemort’s eyes on him and looked up. “What?” said Harry.

“I’m still trying to get used to seeing you without glasses.”

“I only have to change the lenses once a week and I see better with them,” said Harry with a shrug. “I like them.” Harry looked back down at his book and felt Voldemort move away.

Harry felt like he was getting dizzy by lunch. The stuff he was reading about was fascinating but confusing. While some of it sounded like one of Trewlany’s lessons, some of them sounded so clear and foreboding it was scary.

“So, he’s got you reading, again?” Lucius Malfoy said beside him.

“Um, yeah.”

“Is it working?” said Lucius.

Harry was totally baffled. “I’m not sure,” was the only thing he could think of to say.

“Give it time,” said Lucius. “The Master will figure it out. Why has he gagged him?” said Lucius of the Harry Potter back in the cell. “Has he gotten tired of his whining?”

“Something like that,” said Harry.

Harry felt the burn on his head and waited. “You can’t sneak up on me, Voldemort.”

He chuckled. “I know that my pet,” said Voldemort.

Harry stood up so fast he almost knocked Lucius over. "Do NOT call me that! I will not answer to it, nor will I!"

Voldemort grabbed his face, which silenced Harry. "You will answer to whatever I call you, Harry," said Voldemort. "And I might add, that was a much better response to that then when I called you that yesterday."

Voldemort let Harry pull his face away and Harry caught on. This was for Lucius' behalf.

"What do you want, Voldemort," said Harry. "First Lucius, now you. Won't anyone leave me alone?"

"Watch your mouth boy," said Lucius.

"Make me," dared Harry.

Harry was surprised as Lucius hand came across his face. It almost knocked Harry to the ground.

"The master may find amusement in you, but I don't," said Lucius. He looked to Voldemort. "Is he giving you a hard time, My Lord?" said Lucius.

"I'll admit, he wasn't so disrespectful yesterday," said Voldemort.

"Maybe, I was having a hard day," said Harry.

"As I have told you, Master," said Lucius. "The boy needs discipline. I know. I have one of my own."

"Indeed you do, Lucius," said Voldemort. "But this one is mine to deal with." Voldemort stepped closer to Harry and Harry flinched.

"My lord, I don't really think it requires that," said Lucius.

“You don’t?” said Voldemort. He grabbed Harry’s face and Harry hit his knees. “I just told you that he wasn’t so disrespectful yesterday. Don’t you find that odd?”

Lucius looked down at Harry.

“What could have happened between then and now to make him change?” said Voldemort.

“Lucius, did you know that I have of way of calling Harry when I want him, just as I can call my Death Eaters?”

Now Lucius looked worried. Harry was shaking.

“You do?” said Lucius.

“Yes,” said Voldemort. “I can signal him from anywhere and he knows I want him to come to me. Harry doesn’t always come when I call him, but I know I have his attention.” Voldemort looked over at Lucius. “He didn’t come when I called him yesterday.”

“He didn’t?” said Lucius.

“Do you think that I should punish him?” said Voldemort. He looked at Harry. “What do you think, Harry? Would you like to bleed for Lucius.”

“No,” breathed Harry.

“Master,” said Lucius, “I don’t think this incident is bad enough to-“

“To what Lucius?” said Voldemort. He released Harry and he fell to the ground at Voldemort’s feet. “To prove that this boy will bleed if I touch his scar. To prove that this *is* Harry Potter. To wonder who that boy is in the cage?”

“Master-“

“Silence,” thundered Voldemort. “I know for a fact that this boy is Harry Potter. Severus,” he called. “Take care of Harry.”

“You mean I don’t get to see what happens?” said Harry.

“We did it for you, My Lord,” Lucius insisted.

“Come along, Potter,” said Snape, dragging Harry off the ground to his feet. Snape helped him to his tent. “Good work, Harry,” said Snape, once inside. “You did it.” Snape settled Harry into a chair and went back outside.

Harry wondered what he was talking about. Then his brain froze on the realization. Voldemort had done it again. He had swayed Harry back. Voldemort had manipulated the whole neglect scenario to perfection. Harry had been glad when Voldemort had realized he was the real Harry. Harry had wanted him to. Harry wanted, *needed* the recognition. Voldemort gave it to him and Harry accepted it.

Harry wanted to cry again. How was he going to fight against a wizard who used Harry’s own nature against him?

“What’s wrong, Harry?” said Voldemort.

“You cheat,” said Harry.

“So I do,” said Voldemort.

“It isn’t fair,” said Harry. He lifted his gaze from the book to look over the campfire at Voldemort. It had been three days since the imposter had been discovered. Harry knew that nothing had been done to either of them. He knew that the whole plan was to show Harry how Voldemort could manipulate his life to make him do and act as Voldemort wanted.

“Who said life is fair? Deal with it.”

“I all ready have to deal with you. Why should I have to deal with that?” said Harry.

“Ah my poor, Harry. Always the cynic,” said Voldemort.

“Will you please stop referring to me as yours,” said Harry. “It’s very annoying.”

“Accept the truth, Harry,” said Voldemort. “You are, indeed, mine.”

Harry stood up and dropped the book on the table. “Will you please test me and get it over with. I’d like to go home.”

Voldemort stood up and rounded the fire to stand just outside the flinch zone. “You are home, Harry. Where ever I am is home for you.”

Harry sighed and started walking toward his tent.

“All right, Harry,” said Voldemort behind him. Harry turned. Voldemort tossed him his wand. “Hit me the hardest you can with the strongest curse you know and I will let you go back to Sirius.”

Harry looked at his wand then at Voldemort.

“Go ahead, Harry,” said Voldemort. “You have my permission.”

Harry took a moment to settle his stomach, then realized what was happening. Voldemort was doing it again. Playing on Harry’s emotions. Would Voldemort play by his own rules?”

Harry looked at him. “This is the test?” said Harry.

“Yes.”

Harry lifted his wand.

“*Crucio!*”

Harry saw Voldemort hit the ground, but didn’t wait around to see if it worked. The contract was fulfilled. He apparated home.

“SIRIUS!” shouted Harry has he tore through the house. But the house was empty. The only person that was there was Winky who gave Harry some food and sat by him.

“Master Sirius hasn’t been home in a while, Master Harry,” said Winky. “Now that you are home, I’m sure he will come home.”

Harry collapsed on the floor next to the chair in the living room, feeling so tired he couldn’t move. “Where’s Dobby,” he managed to ask.

“The evil Lord has hired him to take care of you while you are there.”

Harry blinked at her. Dobby was taking care of him at Voldemort’s compound?

“Oh, master,” said Winky. “You are tired. Let Winky put you to bed.”

There was nothing Harry would have liked better but he didn’t want to move. This was the room where he, Sirius and Remus talked about his father. This was the room that his homecoming birthday party was in. This was the first room of the house he had seen that made the house a home. He wasn’t leaving it until Sirius was there.

“Harry? *Harry!*”

Harry stirred at the voice and opened his eyes. Sirius was leaning over him.

“What are you doing on the floor?”

“Waiting for you,” said Harry, sleepily.

Sirius helped him up. Sirius silenced two very excited house elves with a word that Harry didn’t recognize.

“Come on, Harry,” said Sirius. “I don’t know how you did it, but you’re home now, so I’m not going to complain.”

“Home,” said Harry. “I just wanted to come home.”

“All right. Don’t think about it now. Bed.”

Harry felt someone pulling his shoes and socks off then his robe. When we was left in only undergarments, he felt himself pushed into bed, the covers brought to his chin.

“Good night, Harry.” Harry heard then he felt pressure on the top of his head as if someone had pressed their mouth to it. “I love you.”

“Goodnight, Sirius,” said Harry, understanding now. “I love you, too.”

When Harry woke up, he felt better than he had in weeks. He was home, he was free from Voldemort’s contract and even the guilt had subsided somewhat. Severus’ words had helped more than he knew. *Anything can happen.* Harry had to remember that.

When he got downstairs something did happen. He heard Ron’s voice and he tore into the dining room.

“Ron!” said Harry.

“Hi, Harry,” said Ron, chewing on some bacon.

Then he heard Fred and George arguing in the kitchen. “Who else is here?” Harry asked Sirius.

“Everyone,” said Charlie Weasley from the doorway. “Part of plan,” said Charlie, entering the room. “Keep you out of trouble and keep you happy.” He looked around the room as people stared back at. He rubbed his hands together. “So who’s up for some Quidditch?”

Chapter 12

Happiness

Harry couldn't help himself. He laughed. "At last," said Harry. "A plan I can deal with."

Harry swore he had never had a better holiday. It was like living a dream. They played Quidditch almost everyday, had snowball fights and even constructed a very impressive snow fort. Nothing on the outside world touched him and he couldn't have cared less.

The most fun was when Remus showed up one evening after the Weasleys and Hermione had gone home. He had a box with him.

"What's in the box?" said Harry with interest. Remus dropped the box on Harry's lap, fixed himself and drink and found a chair near Sirius.

"So you found it?" said Sirius.

"Yes," said Remus. "Went through the stuff you gave me too. It's all in there."

"What?" said Harry, looking between the two of them.

"Just look, Harry," said Sirius. "Merry Christmas."

Harry put the box on the floor in front of him and leaned over it to shuffle through it. Old parchment, little trinkets, some jewelry, letters. Harry picked up a stack of the letters and realization hit him.

"This stuff is from my parents?" said Harry, looking at Sirius.

Sirius looked at Remus. "All the fun he's been having has made him a bit slow, don't you think?"

Remus laughed but now Harry's curiosity had gone nuts. He grabbed a stack of notes that were tied together.

Dear Remus,

James is absolutely horrible. How could he do this to me? I hate him. I'll never speak to him again.

Harry looked up Remus.

“Lily always came crying to me when she was mad at your father,” said Remus.

And don't you dare tell him why I'm mad at him. If you do, I'll never forgive you.

Lily

Harry flipped to the next one. It appeared that Remus had ordered them.

Dear Sirius,

What the hell is going on? Why isn't Lily writing to me? I haven't done anything wrong. Remus says I have but says he sworn to secrecy so he can't tell me. Do you know? YOU haven't done anything, have you? I swear, Sirius, if you got me into trouble again I'll have to kill you and I'd hate to loose my best friend.

Give me clue, will you.

James

Dear Sirius,

This is getting ridiculous. If I get one more tear stained owl from Lily I'm going to shoot James with the nastiest spell I can come up with. I can't tell him, but you can. But if you tell Lily that I told you, I'll kill you as well.

James missed their anniversary. Totally blew it off.

Harry looked up at Remus.

“When Sirius first asked her to be his steady. It was on the train on the way home for the summer during our 5th year,” said Remus.

“Not that I’m obligated to remember,” said Sirius, “But I had tried to drop James a few hints after seeing how mad Lily was getting.”

“That’s were you get your temper, Harry,” said Remus.

Harry nodded, looking back down at the note. “Severus told me.”

Sirius sat up. “Severus told you?” said Sirius. “How much did he tell you?”

Harry looked up. “All of it, I think,” said Harry.

Sirius looked at Remus.

“Well that’s out,” sighed Remus. “Albus isn’t going to like that.”

“Why?” said Harry.

“But we aren’t going to tell Albus, are we, Remus?” said Sirius.

“Not on your life,” said Remus.

“Why? What is going on?” said Harry.

“Let’s just say we don’t think it’s a good idea if Voldemort knows that you know that Severus tried to save Lily’s life,” said Remus.

Harry nodded. He might use the knowledge to manipulate Harry in some way. Harry was starting to understand why Dumbledore wanted to keep information from Harry. The more Harry knew, the more could be used against him. Brilliant man. Harry should have listened to him.

The next letter was to Sirius.

Sirius, you miserable, rotten, mangy, underhanded scoundrel! YOU TOLD HIM. I’ll hate you until I die. Don’t talk to me, don’t write to me. You even look at me and I’ll put your eyes out! I’ll never forgive you!

“It’s not signed,” said Harry. “My mother?”

“Oh yes,” said Sirius.

Harry looked to the next one.

Dear Sirius,

I believe you may have received an owl from Lily which was well um, not very nice. She’s written to me telling me that she’s called you all sorts of terrible things and threatening you with horrible situations.

Knowing you, my friend, as well as I do, the names were probably very accurate but Lily feels terrible about it now. I patched things up

nicely with her and I think now she thinks I may be angry with her because she took it out on you.

Don't blow this on me, Sirius. I'm counting on you.

James

The next note looked like it had been written by a shaking hand.

My dearest Sirius,

I'm so sorry. Please forgive me. You know how my temper runs amok. I couldn't bear it if you were angry with me or with James because of all the horrible things I said. Please tell me you forgive me. I would be able to sleep if we can't all be friends again.

Lily

Dear Remus,

He hasn't written back to me. Oh, Remus, what am I going to do? James will hate me. Please write to Sirius. He has to forgive me. He just HAS to.

Lily

Dear Remus,

What is Sirius doing? I'm going to kill him. Have you heard from him? Peter hasn't heard from him either. It's like he's dropped off the face of the earth. Let me know if you hear from him.

James

Dear Sirius,

You have four people worried sick now. I don't think this is at all funny.

Peter

Harry blinked at that one then looked up at Sirius. "What were you doing?"

"Lying through my teeth," said Sirius. "I waited about a week and then wrote to them all saying that we had been away. Made up some vacation details and asked how everyone was doing."

"You played dumb?" said Harry.

Sirius nodded. "It was exactly what James wanted me to do."

"But wouldn't the owls have brought back the letters if they couldn't deliver them."

"Our house elf was very absentminded and everyone knew it. If I told them I hadn't gotten any owls they would have blamed her," said Sirius. "It was convenient for me because I had to rely on that excuse a lot."

Dear Sirius,

Hah! Good one. You could probably fake your own death and get away with it. I'm impressed.

Anyway, you asked how I managed to patch things up. Well she wouldn't write to me so I sent some flowers then went into town. It took me half an hour to find one of those muggle money telephones,

figure out how it worked then get the right currency for it. Then I had to get her number. As her family is muggle, they were listed in that book they use and I called her.

I had to keep feeding coins into that bloody machine because it took me ten minutes to convince the person on the other end (who I later found out was Lily's sister Petunia) that I was a friend of Lily's from school. When I mentioned school I thought the girl would hang up on me.

Anyway, I think Lily was impressed with the effort I put forth to make up. I apologized and basically groveled and she started to cry and everything was back to normal.

By the way, have you heard from Remus since the last full moon. I haven't. I'm a little worried. Let me know.

James

Dear Sirius,

Will you tell James to lay off all ready. I'm fine. Just because I can be with you three in school now when I transform, doesn't mean I'm not used to doing it alone. And tell him to watch his mouth. If Lily finds out, she'll throw a fit and then everyone's secret will be out.

Remus

Harry looked up. "My mum didn't know?"

Sirius shook his head.

"She eventually found out about me, but thankfully by then she was so attached to me that it didn't bother her," said Remus. "I never

wanted her to know, because I loved your mother too much to see her afraid of me.”

“And we certainly couldn’t tell her what we were doing at school,” said Sirius. “She *would* have had a fit.” Sirius laughed. “And she would have blamed me.”

Remus laughed too. “Yes, she always blamed Sirius.”

Harry laughed softly as he picked up another stack. This one had his attention because the one on top simply said:

SHE SAID YES!

No salutation, no signature. Harry turned it over.

“Oh, that was when James asked Lily to marry him. He sort of lost all sense of correspondence protocol,’ said Sirius with a laugh. “Wasn’t as bad as when you were born but it was bad enough.”

Harry read through some of them. His father asking Sirius to be best man. His mother complaining to Remus about how difficult his father was being about her family. Remus complaining to Sirius even a few from Peter complaining to both Sirius and Remus that Lily had dragged him into the planning. This really bothered Harry considering what Peter had done to them. To him.

“How did you all manage to stay friends after all this,” said Harry. “All you did was complain.”

Sirius laughed.

“It was Peter,” said Remus. Sirius stopped laughing.

“Really?” said Harry. “How?”

“Go ahead, Remus. He deserves to know.”

Remus nodded at Sirius and turned to Harry. “Well in our little group, Lily had tags for us. James was the strength – he was the most powerful of us, Sirius was the brains – he was the smartest, I was the soul – Lily felt because my suffering, and Peter was the heart – he was always the one that cared. As well as the weakest link.”

“That’s why we should have known it was Peter,” said Sirius. “The heart is always the first thing that breaks.”

“Lily said that after one of your parents more painful rows,” said Remus.

“Now I don’t think that Peter was involved with Voldemort at the time of the wedding,” said Sirius.

“No, I’m sure he wasn’t,” said Remus.

“Why?” said Harry.

“Well I think he would’ve tried to stop it of course,” said Remus. “He would’ve wanted to prohibit the making of the next heir.”

“Good point, Remus,” said Sirius.

“Anyway, Peter pulled us all together the day of the wedding,” said Remus. “All he did was point out the look on Lily’s face when she walked down the isle.”

Harry had to smile.

“That’s it,” said Sirius, looking at Harry. “Happiness.”

And Harry felt bathed in it. Every night the three of them read more letters. Even the latter ones, when Lily was pregnant with Harry and Voldemort’s reign of terror was at its peek, couldn’t detract from the excitement of reading what his father had to say to his friends.

Sirius,

I'm getting scared. Not only because Lily is almost due, but because I've been approached again. There is a spy in the Ministry. I'm sure of it. So is Albus. Voldemort is still hiding but the killing doesn't stop.

My dreams are getting worse.

Harry looked up. "My dad had dreams too?"

"Harry, you've been having dreams?" said Remus.

"Yes, Harry," said Sirius. "He had them too." He looked at Remus. "Yes, Remus. Harry has dreams too."

"Why didn't you say anything?" demanded Remus. "This could change everything."

"What?" said Harry.

"I would have, Remus, but Harry's dreams are present they aren't future," said Sirius.

"Oh," said Remus.

"My dad had dreams of the future that came true?" said Harry.

"He did," said Remus. "Would have been helpful if you did too."

"Sorry," mumbled Harry, looking back at the letter.

I need you with me, Sirius. Please come.

James

Harry looked up at Sirius again. His father always counted on him. Just like Harry always counted on him and on Ron and Hermione. A warmth spread over him as he looked at his godfather.

Sirius smiled gently at Harry. "If he called, I was there, Harry. Just as he had done for me many times. Just as I'd do for you."

"Me too, Harry," said Remus and Harry looked to him.

"Did he ever tell you his dreams?" said Harry.

Sirius stood up, moved to Harry and took the letters out of his hand. It was late.

"No, Harry," said Remus. "James always kept his dreams to himself."

Sirius took Harry by the arm and pulled him up. "He did admit to me though that he knew Lily was going to have a son," said Sirius.

Harry looked up at him. "What did he say?"

"He said a Phoenix told him," said Sirius. "Now, go to bed, it's late."

Harry hugged Sirius then turned to Remus who also hugged him. "Goodnight, Remus."

Harry woke up with the warmth of last night still lingering within him. He was getting dressed when something started tapping on his window. Harry opened the window to let the bird in.

It was a pathetic looking bird. It looked like a half-plucked turkey and almost as dead as a one before a feast. More feathers fell off it when it landed on Harry's bed and looked up at him with dull almost lifeless eyes.

Harry yelled as the thing burst into flames with one loud shriek then realized it was a phoenix. He had seen Fawkes do this once. He quickly pulled the blanket with the fireball on it off his bed and put it on the floor so his bed wouldn't catch fire.

"What is it?" Sirius said rushing in. "What's going..." He stared at the fireball on the floor. "Where did that come from?" said Sirius as it turned into a pile of smoldering ashes.

"It just flew in the window," said Harry. A few minutes later, a tiny, wrinkled, newborn bird looking as ugly as the original poked its head out of the ash.

"It just flew in the window?" said Sirius. "Phoenixes just don't fly into people's window and burst into flames."

"Well it did," said Harry.

"Great," said Sirius.

"What?" said Harry.

"Look's like you have another pet," said Sirius. "That Phoenix picked you. It's yours now."

"What do you mean?"

"Well it came here right before it's rebirth. That means it picked you. The Phoenix it became just now will be faithful only to you."

Harry picked up the little bird. It nestled into his palm and started to sing. Harry recognized the feeling he got from it. Harry looked into the little eyes. "You're right," said Harry. "She says she's mine."

From her perch, Hedwig hooted.

"What's going on up here," said Remus from the door. He surveyed the scene and guessed. "Harry got a Phoenix? Oh this is too weird."

"What? Why is that weird?" said Harry, settling the phoenix onto Hedwig's perch beside the water where she drank eagerly.

"Remus, will you keep your mouth shut for a change," said Sirius.

Harry remembered his thoughts about having too much information and rescued Remus. "Never mind," said Harry. "I'm very sure that I don't want to know."

Ron came over after breakfast with Ginny and Harry showed them his new pet.

"It really just came in the window?" said Ginny and she stroked it gently.

"Well it knocked first," said Harry.

"And it burst into flames right in front of you?" said Ron.

"Yes," said Harry. "Then she told me, she was mine."

"It's a girl then," said Ginny. Harry nodded. "What are you going to call her?"

"Haven't decided," said Harry. "What do you think?" he asked Ginny.

"Oh don't ask her, Harry," said Ron. "Look at the name she gave Pig."

Harry only laughed as he watched Ginny look at the phoenix intently as if giving it a great amount of thought. The phoenix started to sing.

"Does Hedwig like her?" asked Ron, glancing toward Harry's owl.

"I think the jury is still out on that one," said Harry. He lifted his arm and Hedwig flew to him. "You know you're my best owl, don't you girl?" said Harry, stoking Hedwig. Hedwig nipped his fingers and rubbed her head against his face.

"Rowan," said Ginny suddenly.

"What?" said Ron.

"Her name. It should be Rowan."

"Why?" said Harry.

"I don't know," said Ginny, stilling looking into the phoenix' eyes. "It just fits somehow."

Harry looked at the Phoenix who looked back peacefully, then looked at Hedwig. "What do you think, Girl?" said Harry. "Should we welcome Rowan into the family?"

Hedwig bit Harry's ear but nudged Ginny's arm then flew back to her perch.

"Was that a yes," said Ron.

"As much of a yes as you'll get from Hedwig," said Harry.

Ginny handed Rowan back to Harry. "Are we playing Quidditch today?" she asked.

"I'm always up for a game," said Harry, putting Rowan in the small compartment he had made for her.

"I'll go tell the boys," said Ginny as she took off. Ginny, Harry had discovered was quite a good chaser and she loved the game.

They all met at the clearing and had played two games when pain erupted in Harry's head.

"All right, Harry?" said Charlie. "Looked like you almost fell off there."

"Yeah, I'm all right," said Harry, scanning the ground briefly. He didn't see anything but dove down to Hermione who was refereeing and keeping score. Hermione didn't fly all that well and preferred to watch rather than play.

"Hermione," said Harry. "Ref the game from the air this time ok?"

"What? Why, Harry?"

"Please, just do it. I'm begging you."

"Oh all right," said Hermione. "But don't complain to me if I miss something."

"I won't," said Harry as he zoomed off. He did a full circle of the field and still didn't see anything.

"What's up, Harry?" said Ron, hovering next to him. "How'd you get Hermione in the air?"

"I asked her to," said Harry. "Ron. Voldemort's here."

“What?”

“I’m sure he’s only watching but I can feel him. He’s here.”

“Shouldn’t we leave now then?” said Ron.

“No way. I’m not going to let him spoil my fun.”

“Right, then,” said Ron. “Charlie, you ready?”

“We’re ready,” said Charlie. He aimed his wand at the box and all the balls erupted and the six of them (they were playing 3 on 3 – Fred, George, Charlie, Ron, Ginny and Harry) moved into the game.

Harry wasn’t sure what the score was when he saw the Snitch. Charlie had seen it too though and they both raced toward it.

“Give it up, Harry,” said Charlie, laughing.

But the Snitch dove. Harry smiled. Dives were his specialty. “No way Charlie.”

They both dove after it. Harry heard Ron shouting behind him. “You’ve got it, Harry. Charlie can’t do that!”

Charlie pulled up a safe distance from the ground as the Snitch turned and Harry did what Ron was referring to. He jumped up onto his broom and pulled up even with the ground right behind the Snitch. Letting go of the broom, Harry reached out and dove, catching the snitch and tumbling on the ground after a perfect catch.

“Keep that up, Harry,” said Fred, circling him. “And they’re going to start calling that the Potter Dive.”

“I would never have even tried that when I was young,” said Charlie, landing next to Harry. “That was very creative.”

“He’s done it before,” said Hermione, coming to a rough landing beside them. “Harry’s famous for it.”

They talked about the games as they cleaned up. Charlie miniaturized the trunk with the balls and put it in his pocket and they

began the trek home. They were half way through the woods when pain exploded in Harry's head.

Voldemort's hand clamped around Harry's chin and Harry's knees hit the ground.

Chapter 13

The Last Domino

“Hello, Harry,” said Voldemort.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Charlie and Fred grab Ron and he saw Hermione grab Ginny.

“Enjoying yourself?” said Voldemort.

“I was,” Harry managed to say.

“Good,” said Voldemort. “As I told you, everything you do is controlled by me. You do realize that don’t you, Harry. This wonderful vacation is happening because I’m allowing it to happen.”

“That’s not true.”

Hermione clamped a hand over Ginny’s mouth.

“Very wise, Miss Granger,” said Voldemort. He looked back down at Harry. “I will give you another 3 days then you will come back to me before you go back to school,” said Voldemort.

“You can’t make me,” said Harry.

“Oh, but I can, Harry.” Voldemort raised his free hand and brought it to toward Harry’s scar. The cry of pain was ripped from his lungs. “3 days, Harry,” said Voldemort as he let go and Harry fell to the ground. Voldemort stood up. “Gentlemen,” he said to the Weasleys. “Ladies,” he said to the girls. Then Harry felt him leave.

Harry heard arguing over his head as he pushed himself to his hands and knees.

“Harry, are you all right?”

It was Ginny and she had wrapped her arm around his chest. It was comforting. "You stood up to him," said Harry.

"Yes, she's a brave little fool," said Fred as he grabbed Harry's arm. Charlie grabbed his other arm and they helped him up.

Harry reeled slightly. Voldemort hadn't touched the scar but had come close enough to it.

"He needs immediate attention," said George. "Let's take him to our house, it's closer."

As Harry was half dragged half carried to the Weasley's, he couldn't help feeling a deep sense of foreboding. What did Voldemort mean that all this holiday was because HE allowed it. He had given Harry 3 more days. How could Voldemort make him go back?

The promise of more pain certainly wouldn't do it. A hostage?

Mrs. Weasley went nuts when they carried Harry in. Of course, she took instant control of the situation and went about making Harry comfortable. When Sirius arrived, he pulled the boys outside to find out precisely what was said and by the time he came back in to inspect Harry, he didn't look pleased.

"Ron said you knew he was there," said Sirius.

"I didn't think he would actually show himself, Sirius."

"But he did," said Sirius. "So he's checking up on you, now."

"Did Charlie tell you what he said?" said Harry.

"Yes."

"What does it mean?"

Sirius sighed. "I'm not sure, Harry," said Sirius, sitting down on the sofa next to Harry who was stretched out in it. "I'm just not sure."

"You don't think he'll try to take a hostage, do you?" said Harry.

“Everyone is packing now. They will be back at Hogwarts before dawn.”

“So he managed to spoil my vacation anyway,” said Harry.

“Harry-“ said Sirius.

Harry forced himself to sit up and reached out. “Take me home, Sirius. Please.”

Sirius settled Harry into bed and Rowan flew over right away. She tucked herself under his chin as he fell asleep and Harry slept peacefully. Harry spent the next couple of days going through the letters again. Reminding himself that he had lost everything because of Voldemort. He knew he was going back. He had to go back. But he was going back with the fresh memories of his parents’ words and the memories they had with their friends. Voldemort was not going to take them away.

“Are you sure, Harry?” said Remus.

“Yes,” said Harry. “He is using my own nature against me. He knows I’ll come just to keep him from doing something to make me come.”

Sirius nodded and grabbed Harry into a hard embrace. “Just remember, Harry. Remember.”

“I know, Sirius,” said Harry. He put a hand to his heart. “It’s all in here.”

Another nightmare.

Harry stared into the campfire. He had apparated into his chair. No one had noticed him yet, so he relaxed. He could hear Voldemort somewhere in the compound barking orders. He didn’t sound pleased. Someone was ordered tortured. Harry didn’t catch the name. He hoped it was a Death Eater.

Voldemort was moving closer to the fire, but he was still issuing orders so Harry doubted he had noticed Harry sitting in his chair. It was a big chair after all and you could easily be overlooked if you weren't being sought.

"And no one is to touch the boy if he shows up today," said Voldemort, proof that he hadn't noticed Harry yet. "And I'm to be—"

"You can't sneak up on me, Voldemort," said Harry as Voldemort hit the flinch zone.

Harry met those red eyes.

"Ah, Harry, you came. I knew you would."

"I knew that you knew I would," said Harry.

"How well we know each other," said Voldemort, looking a lot more pleased than he sounded before. "Are you hungry?"

"I could eat," said Harry.

Food appeared on the table beside his chair as Voldemort circled the fire and sat down in his chair.

"So what do you want?"

"I'd like to propose another contract," said Voldemort.

"With what?" said Harry. "You don't have anything to bargain with."

"Oh but I do, Harry," said Voldemort. "I have you."

"Me?" said Harry.

"The wizarding world is a complex web, Harry," said Voldemort. "And all the lives interconnected with your own have woven their way right back to me." Voldemort laughed, that cold laugh that Harry remembered from the graveyard. "You are indeed mine now, Harry."

"I don't believe you," said Harry.

“Think about it, Harry,” said Voldemort. “All the lives connected with yours and mine. You have read up on the Wizard Honor, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” said Harry.

“So what we have is a whole line up of lives, much like a complex set up of dominoes,” said Voldemort. “Do you know what I mean, Harry? Have you ever set up dominoes.”

Harry’s skin was starting to get goose bumps. “Yes,” he said.

“You saved Peter, Peter restored me to my body. James saved Severus. Severus begged me to save Lily but Lily saved you. Severus then saved you. You also saved Sirius.”

Harry’s head was starting to spin. “What does it mean?” said Harry.

“It means Harry that all I need is the last domino.”

“You lost me,” said Harry.

“Harry, my boy, what happens when you knock one domino down?” said Voldemort.

“They all fall,” said Harry.

“But the last domino always falls askew, doesn’t it?” said Voldemort.

Actually it did, considered Harry. “So.”

“Oh, Harry,” said Voldemort. “Didn’t I teach you anything. Who is left? Who is the last domino.”

Harry stared into those red eyes. Peter was already his, his parents were dead, Severus was a Death Eater all ready too. “Sirius,” whispered Harry.

“Oh yes,” said Voldemort. “Sirius will do anything to protect his godson. Even join me. What I couldn’t do through the father, I can now do through the son.”

“No,” cried Harry. “He won’t do it. I know he won’t.”

“He will, Harry,” said Voldemort. “You know he will.”

“What do you want?” said Harry, carefully.

“Why, I want you to stay with me of course,” said Voldemort.

Harry felt his stomach wretch again. Voldemort didn’t have a hostage but knew he could get one. He knew that Sirius would even become a Death Eater if Voldemort convinced him Sirius could protect Harry by becoming one. This was worse than being tied by a contract. His father would roll over in his grave if Sirius did this, but Harry was afraid Sirius would do it for Harry. Harry couldn’t let him do it.

“All right, Voldemort,” said Harry in a hollow sounding voice. “You win. I’ll stay. At least for now.”

Voldemort smiled that grin of his. “Oh, don’t take it so bad, my boy,” he said. “Destiny is on your side.”

Harry glared at him. “Not if you listen to Professor Trewlaney,” muttered Harry.

“Always the cynic, my Harry.”

Harry tried to ignore the possessiveness of that remark. “Can I leave now?” said Harry.

“You just said you were staying.”

“I meant to my tent although Bulgaria sounds good too,” said Harry.

“Ah, Harry, how I have missed you. If you aren’t hungry, then yes you may go,” said Voldemort.

Harry stepped out of his tent the next morning and stopped. The compound was such a flurry of activity, Harry considered that maybe the camp had been found. Harry could hope.

Voldemort was across the compound talking with a man who Harry had never seen. He wasn't dressed as a Death Eater, either. Voldemort appeared perfectly at ease, which told Harry they hadn't been found.

Harry spotted Snape and went directly to him. "So you're here," said Harry.

Snape looked at him with surprise. "Of course, I'm here. What are you doing here?" said Snape.

Harry looked at the ground. "He has his ways," said Harry. "What's going on?" Harry's eyes swept the camp again and returned his gaze to Snape.

Snape stared at him. "What's he using?" said Snape. "And you may as well tell me because if I ask him, he'll tell me."

"He said he could make Sirius a Death Eater."

"Well, I don't think he could do that," said Snape. "But there are only a few days before school re-starts, so you don't have to—"

"Whoa, who's that?" said Harry. A girl had joined Voldemort and the stranger. A beautiful girl.

Snape followed Harry's gaze. "That is the ambassador's daughter and you will stay away from her."

"Why?" said Harry incredulously. Her hair was longer than any he had ever seen and as black as his own. Her heart-shaped face was unblemished. Harry wanted to get closer.

Snape grabbed his arm. "Harry, the last thing you need to do right now is complicate things with a new friend."

Harry stared at Snape. He was right. It was dangerous again to be Harry's friend. "So what is with the Ambassador?"

"The Ministry of Magic has sent an Ambassador from the States under a flag of truce to try and arbitrate."

Harry blinked at him. "Arbitrate?"

"Fools think they can just convince Voldemort to disband," said Snape.

Harry shook his head. Snape moved away toward Voldemort. Harry didn't feel like suffering through any weird introductions, especially in front of the girl, so he decided on breakfast.

Harry piled some food on a plate and went to his chair by the fire, trying to ignore all the activity. There were more Death Eaters around than he had seen in the compound yet. It was too much to hope that he'd get through the meal without Voldemort bothering him. Before he even sat down, Harry's hand hit his head. He managed not to drop his plate,

It was only a signal and as Harry turned toward where Voldemort had been standing, he found most of the group looking at him. Harry looked back at his plate. He had lost his appetite but he put it on the table beside the chair and picked up a piece of bacon off it and put it in his mouth. He continued to look at his plate as if considering Voldemort's call.

Another signal. Harry fought to keep his hand from hitting his head. He put another piece of bacon in his mouth. Another signal, this time longer. Harry looked over at Voldemort again. He appeared as if he was fighting to control his expression.

Voldemort raised a hand then and hailed Harry the regular way. Harry sighed and decided not to press his luck. He walked over.

Harry stopped outside the flinch zone and looked at Voldemort.

"Ah, Harry," said Voldemort. "Good of you to join us."

He sent a glance toward the strangers now. They stared at him and Harry felt awkward not knowing whether they stared because of who he was or because they knew of the power struggle Harry and Voldemort just went through.

Harry was introduced to Ambassador Matthew Johnson and his daughter Crystal. He tried not to stare at the girl and didn't even notice if either one of them gave a glance to his forehead. Holding his hand out to the man, Harry politely said, "It's nice to meet you."

Mr. Johnson looked at Harry's hand then looked at Harry's face as if he'd rather die than touch him. Crystal was looking at the ground.

Harry looked at Voldemort. "What lies have you been telling them, Voldemort?" said Harry.

"Oh, Harry," said Voldemort. "You know I have little use for lies when the truth is so much more satisfying."

"Then why is he looking at me like I'm more of a monster than you are," said Harry.

The statement got a puzzled look from the ambassador.

"Careful, Harry," warned Voldemort.

Harry looked at the ambassador. "What's he been telling you about me?" said Harry.

"Harry, I have told you to address your questions to me," said Voldemort, his displeasure plain on his face. "I have not told him anything. He is merely here because the entire wizarding world knows the truth now?"

"What truth?" said Harry, really not liking the sound of that.

"Why, that Harry Potter belongs to Lord Voldemort, now, of course," said Voldemort.

"WHAT?" shouted Harry. He looked at Mr. Johnson. "The Ministry of Magic thinks I've joined *him*?" said Harry, incredulously.

"You're here, aren't you?" said Mr. Johnson, although he looked a little confused now. Even Crystal had finally lifted her gaze from the ground and was staring at him.

Even meeting her beautiful blue eyes, which were so light they almost looked like blue ice, could keep Harry's temper from rising.

"I'm only here because he uses extortion to keep me here," said Harry. "Everyone in this camp knows it. Dumbledore knows it."

"Harry, I think you've said enough," said Voldemort.

"Too bad," said Harry. "If you didn't want me telling them the truth, you shouldn't have called me over here."

"I'm getting angry, Harry," said Voldemort, taking a step into the flinch zone. "Do you think I won't punish you in front of our guests?"

"And prove to them that I'm telling the truth," said Harry. "Go ahead. I dare you."

"But will it prove that you're telling the truth?" said Voldemort.

He grabbed Harry's face and Harry hit his knees, staring up at Voldemort with surprise. He really hadn't thought he would do it.

"Or would it show them that Harry Potter is indeed totally under my control?" said Voldemort, reaching his other hand toward Harry's face. Voldemort's finger slowly moved up the side of his face. The pain growing with each centimeter. "How bad is the pain, Harry?"

Voldemort was prolonging it, moving his hand so slowly. Harry wasn't sure how he was enduring it. It was a new sort of torture that Harry wished would end. But he couldn't move, could only stare up into those red eyes, shaking with pain. Everything was a blur around him.

Harry felt his eyes burn and water as Voldemort's finger moved up again.

"Ah, that's new," said Voldemort, noticing the tear in his eye. "It's that bad is it?"

"Stop it. What are you doing?" someone said. Harry couldn't tell who. "You're hurting him."

Voldemort's gaze left Harry's briefly. "Oh, indeed I am, Miss Johnson," said Voldemort then he turned back to Harry. "And Harry," said Voldemort. "Never dare me."

His hand hit the scar and Harry hit the ground, screaming.

Chapter 14

A New Ally

Harry laid there, breathing so hard his lungs hurt. Everything else hurt anyway. The scar was throbbing under Harry's hand. He couldn't move to save his soul.

"He'll behave now," he heard Voldemort say above his head.

"Harry?" Harry heard in front of him and felt a hand fall on top of his head. "Harry can you hear me?" It was Snape.

"Is he gone?" said Harry. Through the pain Harry couldn't tell if Voldemort had left.

"Yes," said Snape. "Move your arm so I can look at your head."

"I can't move yet, Severus," said Harry. "Give me a minute. And yes, you know it's bleeding."

"Is he all right?" It sounded like Mr. Johnson.

"Of course, he isn't all right, you idiot," snapped Severus. "He's just been tortured."

“Are you telling me that’s the way he’s been controlling the boy?” said Johnson.

“No, Johnson,” said Severus. “That’s the way he punishes him when he steps out of line. Voldemort can’t control Harry. All he can do is keep him here and make everyone think he can control him.”

“But, how-“

“Exactly the way Harry told you,” said Severus. “Extortion.”

“This is good news,” said Johnson. “When the Ministry finds out-“

“You fool,” barked Snape. “Do you think Voldemort will let you leave now after what you’ve seen?”

Harry heard a gasp from a different direction and groaned. He had almost forgotten about *her* and she had seen the whole humiliating scene.

“You should have kept your mouth shut, Harry,” said Severus.

“I didn’t think he’d actually do it,” said Harry.

“Well he did and now the Johnson’s are in danger,” said Severus

“I’m sorry,” choked Harry. Just what he needed, more guilt.

“Not that kind of danger, Harry,” said Severus. “They are here under a wizard’s white flag which Voldemort accepted. But he may use them against you now.”

“Great.” Harry managed to push himself to his hands and knees. He heard another gasp as he looked up.

“How bad is it?” Harry asked Severus. He could feel the blood flowing down his face.

“It’s pretty bad.” Severus grabbed his arm. “Help me with him, Johnson.”

Harry looked blankly around.

“What’s wrong with him?” said Matthew Johnson.

“Well aside from still being in great pain and bleeding profusely, he can’t see,” said Severus.

Harry heard another gasp as he was hauled to his feet. That was the last sound he heard.

Harry woke up feeling something being gently held to his scar.

“How are you feeling?”

Crystal Johnson was the person sitting beside him on his bed, holding what ever it was to Harry’s head.

“What are you doing here?” said Harry.

“Severus told me to stay with you,” she said. “He went to make a potion. How are you feeling?” she asked again.

“I’ll live,” said Harry.

“That was very scary to watch, Mr. Potter,” said Crystal Johnson. “But I’m glad to know that you haven’t joined *him*.”

“*him*,” said Harry, feeling cynical again. “Miss Johnson, he killed my parents, treats me like a pet, takes great satisfaction in seeing me in pain and keeps me from my family and friends against my will. Why would I ever want to join *him*.”

“So it’s true. He’s not using the Imperius Curse either.”

“That doesn’t work on me,” said Harry.

“And you can counter the Cruacius Curse, too?”

Harry wondered what Snape had been telling them. “It knocks me off my feet but that’s about all.”

“No wonder everyone is worried,” Crystal said. “You must be a very powerful wizard.”

“So, you’re awake?” Harry heard Snape say from across the room. “And it sounds like you’ve got another fan.”

Harry sighed. “Since you’re about to put me in pain again, Professor, do you think you could spare me from the ‘famous Harry Potter’ routine.”

Severus Snape actually laughed softly. “Voldemort’s right, Harry. You are becoming quite cynical.”

“What does he mean ‘pain again?’” said Crystal. “What are you going to do?”

“These drops,” said Severus. “Are to restore his vision. They hurt.”

“At least they work,” said Harry.

“Are you sure you’re ready, Harry?”

“Yes. I don’t see well to begin with but it’s better than this total blackness.”

“Oh, yes. I almost forgot,” said Severus. “Your lenses, Harry. You’ll have to take them out. I don’t know if the drops will work with them in.”

Harry heard movement at the flap of the tent.

“What do you want, Wormtail,” said Severus.

“Get out, Pettigrew,” said Harry.

“The master wants to know how Harry is?” said Wormtail.

“Tell Voldemort to go to-“:

“Harry,” Severus cut him off. “Tell the master he’ll be up in a couple of days.”

Wormtail left and Harry took out his lenses. He endured the drops and looked around for his glasses. Severus left Harry and Crystal to overcome Harry’s sight problem and while Crystal couldn’t find Harry’s glasses for him, she did find a few replacement lenses that Harry had left.

“I thought it was odd that you weren’t wearing glasses when I met you,” Crystal said. “All the pictures I’ve seen of you showed you wearing glasses.”

Crystal handed him the envelop containing his contact lenses and Harry gave her a brief detail of how he started using them. She listened intently, sitting in a chair next to Harry’s bed. Harry felt oddly comfortable talking with her. Maybe because she had seen him at his worst which could be considered at his best and had stayed by him anyway.

Harry reached up and the Saline flew from his dresser into his hand. He wet the lenses and put them into his eyes. He looked up at Crystal.

He had forgotten how lovely she was. Why was she being so nice to him? She tossed her very long hair over her shoulder, looking very surprised at him.

Harry became nervous suddenly. “What?” said Harry.

“You just – well – summoned that bottle,” said Crystal. “Without a wand.”

“Oh,” said Harry, feeling relieved. “Voldemort won’t let me have a wand here,” Harry explained. “So I have to do without.”

“Wow,” said Crystal. “He really doesn’t scare you, does he?”

“Of course, he does,” lied Harry. “I just don’t show it.”

Crystal smiled at him, looking as if she didn’t believe him.

“Crys?”

They both turned toward the door.

“Come on, my dear. I’m told Harry needs to rest.”

“I’m coming, Dad,” said Crystal. She stood up but looked down at Harry. “May I borrow a book from your library, Harry?”

“Sure,” said Harry. “Although it isn’t my library. This is just the tent Voldemort assigned to me.”

“Come on, Crys,” said the ambassador. “You can talk to your new friend tomorrow.”

Crystal Johnson looked back down at Harry. “Are you my friend, Harry? Will you let me be your friend?”

Harry was afraid the question was moot. Looking into those ice blue eyes, he knew he was all ready lost. He could no more stop her than he could Ron or Hermione. He also felt that he didn’t want too.

“I’d be honored to call you my friend, Crystal,” said Harry.

She leaned over him and kissed his cheek. “I’ll see you tomorrow then, Harry,” she whispered.

Warm spread over Harry and he smiled. She smiled back and left with her father.

When Harry woke the next morning, he managed to get cleaned up and changed then he collapsed in a chair in the library. He had just summoned a book to him when he heard Crystal.

“Harry, can I come in?”

Harry, desperate for company, especially a beautiful girl’s company eagerly called her in.

“Harry,” said Crystal, after she took a good look at Harry. “You shouldn’t be out of bed.”

“It’s too boring in there, Crys,” said Harry, tiredly, not realizing that he had just cut Crystal’s name in half. “It’s making me nuts.”

Crystal walked over to him, took the book out of his hands and lifted his face with a touch so gentle, Harry sighed.

“All right, Harry,” said Crystal. “You sit there and I will read to you.”

“You are going to read to me?” said Harry, feeling floored.

“Yes,” said Crystal. “It isn’t difficult. Don’t tell me no one has ever read to you.”

Harry looked at the ground. OK, so he wouldn’t tell her that no one had ever read him a bedtime story. That no one had ever taken the consideration to read to him when he was young.

Harry closed his eyes and leaned back against the chair. Crystal began to read.

The softness of her voice as it fell on his ears as well as the fact that it was one of Lockhart’s books made Harry doze slightly. The dull burn on his forehead woke him up.

“Ah, Harry, my pet,” said Voldemort. “Good to see you out of bed.”

Harry stood up so quickly, if Crystal hadn’t grabbed him, he would have fallen. “Don’t call me that, Voldemort.”

Voldemort chuckled, studying Harry then looking at Crystal. “Well this looks cozy,” said Voldemort.

Harry noticed Hedwig then, sitting on his arm and raised his own. Hedwig flew right to him.

“What a beautiful owl,” said Crystal.

“Are you reading my mail again, Voldemort?” said Harry as Hedwig rubbed her head under Harry’s chin.

“No, my boy, I merely borrowed her,” said Voldemort, holding up the card that was addressed to Voldemort. “As the ambassador will be staying for an extended visit, I have arranged through the Headmaster for Miss Johnson to attend Hogwarts for the semester.”

“I’m going to school here?” said Crystal.

Voldemort looked to her as she settled Harry back into the chair. “Yes, my dear.”

Crystal looked excited as she looked down at Harry. “Did you hear that, Harry?” said Crystal.

Harry stared hard at Voldemort. What was he doing now? “I heard him.”

“I can see you aren’t strong enough yet, Harry,” said Voldemort. “But once you are, Crystal will need to purchase the supplies she needs for school.”

Harry’s brows shot up. “Are you asking me to take Crystal to Diagon Alley for her supplies?” said Harry.

Voldemort smirked at his choice of wording. “You might say that.”

“Will you beg me?” said Harry, then immediately regretted it. He held out a hand as Voldemort stepped toward him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. It was automatic.”

Voldemort studied him and smiled. “I believe you. You aren’t that stupid,” said Voldemort. “Nor are you strong enough for me to get close to you.” He turned to Crystal. “When he is strong enough, notify me and I will arrange transportation.”

Voldemort left and Crystal began to pummel Harry with questions about the school. Harry told her about the four houses, some of the courses and about his friends. Crystal seemed very

interested in meeting Ron and Hermione. Harry was surprised to learn that she was in fact a year below him.

“Ginny will look after you,” said Harry. “That’s Ron’s sister.”

Crystal was so excited that Harry made sure he was strong enough the next day. They traveled via floo powder to Diagon Alley and Harry felt like he was seeing it again for the first time.

Crystal had brought nothing into the camp with her (such was the white flag arrangement) so they had to visit all the shops. Voldemort had given him plenty of money (Harry wasn’t sure if it was the Johnson’s or his own) but Harry made sure Crystal had everything she needed, including her own owl so she could write to her father.

Harry had even taken her to Gringotts to get some money out of his own vault in case he saw something he needed. He ended up buying Crystal her own copy of *Hogwarts, A History*. Crystal loved the gesture and kissed Harry’s cheek.

When they got back to the compound, Harry was exhausted. Voldemort didn’t look pleased.

“Harry, you have over-exerted yourself.”

“It was worth it,” said Harry. “I can sleep on the train tomorrow.” Harry looked at Voldemort. “You will let me take her by the Hogwarts Express?”

“What’s the Hogwarts Express?” said Crystal, sounding excited again. She hadn’t read the book yet.

“Will you beg me, Harry?” said Voldemort.

Harry stared at him. “I’m asking,” said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled. “All right, Harry,” said Voldemort. “I will arrange it.”

Crystal's reaction to Platform 9 ¾ was about the same as Harry's had been the first time he had seen it. They found a compartment and settled Crystal's stuff into it, and set the owls on seats beside them. Hedwig didn't have a cage but the conductor knew Harry and let her in anyway. Harry gave Crystal the window seat.

Crystal pulled out the book on Hogwarts. "You get some sleep, Harry. I'll be fine."

Harry nodded and stretched out on the seat across from hers.

He woke to an irritating voice.

"You must be new."

It was Malfoy. Harry didn't move. He'd rather pretend to be asleep then deal with him. Apparently, Crystal had laid a blanket over him up to his ears. He was pretty sure Malfoy couldn't tell it was him. One wrong word from Malfoy, though and Harry would trounce him, even if Crabbe and Goyle were there.

"Hello," said Crystal. "Yes. This is my first time going to Hogwarts."

"My names, Malfoy. Draco Malfoy."

"Oh," said Crystal, sounding disappointed. "Are you related to Lucius Malfoy?"

"Yes," said Malfoy, who didn't seem to notice. "He's my father."

"Oh," was all Crystal had to say.

"And you are?" said Malfoy.

"Crystal Johnson."

"Oh," said Malfoy. "The ambassador's daughter. That must be Potter then," said Malfoy.

“Yes and please be quiet. He’s very tired.”

“Tired, is he,” Harry heard Crabbe say.

Harry almost sat up then. Then he heard another voice.

“Who are you harassing now, Malfoy?”

It was Ron. Harry just waited, listening.

“None of your business, Weasley,” said Malfoy. “Go away.”

“Weasley?” said Crystal. “Ron Weasley?”

“Er – yeah,” said Ron. Harry could bet his ears were turning red.

“You’re Harry’s friend then,” said Crystal.

“HARRY!” shouted Ron, as if he had just noticed the body laying on the other seat.

There was no way Harry could pretend to still be asleep after that. He sat up.

“Hey, Ron.” Harry looked at Malfoy. “You can leave now, Malfoy.”

“All right, there Harry?” said Ron. He looked Harry over. “Well I can see you aren’t.”

“Get yourself punished again, did you, Potter,” said Malfoy.

That statement seemed to upset Crystal. She looked at Ron. “Can’t you make them leave?”

“We can,” said Fred as he and George came up behind them. “Move along boys. Professor Lupin is coming this way.”

The trio left as Remus approached the door. “Problem gentlemen?” said Remus. He eyes moved over the compartment. “Harry!”

“Hi, Remus,” said Harry. “Are you teaching again?”

“Yes,” said Remus. “Albus sent Moody out so I’ve got DADA again.”

“That’s great,” said Ron.

“And Sirius is temporarily teaching Transfiguration,” said Remus. “McGonagall had to go to her grand-daughter’s. Some sort of mid-wife problem.”

“What’s going on, Remus?” Harry heard from the hall. Remus just stepped back to let Sirius into the doorway.

“Hello, Sirius,” said Harry.

Sirius didn’t say a word. He merely pulled Harry into his arms.

“I’m fine,” said Harry.

“You don’t look fine,” said Sirius. He glanced around and Harry finally got around to introducing Crystal. She looked very pleased with the warm reception she received from Harry’s friends and family.

Harry told them all what had happened and Sirius and Remus listened with interest. Then Sirius turned to Harry. “All right, I’ll deal with it. You go back to sleep.” He turned to the rest of them. “You leave him alone.” He turned to Remus. “We have to check the rest of the train.”

Remus nodded and moved away down the hall.

“Sleep. I mean it, Harry,” said Sirius.

“I will. I will,” said Harry.

As they dispersed, Harry laid back down.

“I like them, Harry,” said Crystal.

“So do I,” said Harry, tiredly. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a fist full of gold. “When the lunch cart comes by, get a bunch of stuff. I’m starving.”

Crystal smiled at him. “All right, Harry.”

“So what are you doing on the train?” said Harry.

He, Ron and Crystal were going through the fare Crystal had bought from the lunch trolley.

“We had to go home,” said Ron. “Dad got a promotion and we had to go to this huge ceremony.”

“That’s great,” said Harry. “Where did they put him?”

“They gave him Crouches old job,” said Ron. He’s the head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation,” Ron said..

“Your father works for the Ministry?” said Crystal.

“Yeah.”

“That’s wonderful,” said Crystal. “Your father can tell them that Harry hasn’t joined *him*.”

Ron blinked at her. “Well of course my father knows Harry would never join You-Know-Who. Fudge is being a jerk though. Ever since that ambassador didn’t respond.”

“Er, Ron,” said Harry. “Crystal is the ambassador’s daughter.”

Ron looked at Crystal. “Really? What happened?” said Ron.

Harry sighed and told Ron the whole story.

“He punished you in front of the ambassador?” said Ron.

“He tortured him,” said Crystal, breathlessly.

“No wonder you’re done in,” said Ron. “But-“

“Ron,” said Harry. “Voldemort won’t let the ambassador leave now because he knows the truth. He doesn’t want the Ministry to hear his testimony.”

“But my entire family knows you, Harry,” said Ron. “Half of them work for the Ministry. Even Percy likes you.”

The train was pulling to stop.

“We’ve got to get robed,” said Ron. “We’ll talk again later. I guess Crystal will have to be sorted.”

Harry looked at Crystal. She looked scared suddenly. “Don’t worry. It’ll be fine.”

“What house are you in?” said Crystal.

“We’re in Gryffindor,” said Harry. “But who knows where the Sorting Hat will put you. Just hope it isn’t Slytherin.”

“Why?”

“Well for starters, that’s where most of the Death Eaters came from,” said Harry.

“Well that’s enough for me,” said Crystal.

Harry went to the Gryffindor table as Snape (who was apparently acting as temporary assistant headmaster in McGonagall’s absence) escorted Crystal to the front of the room.

Dumbledore stood up and addressed the Great Hall. “We begin the semester by welcoming a temporary guest to the school. This is Miss Crystal Johnson from the colonies. Please make her feel welcome.”

The students all applauded and Snape directed Crystal to the stool. She sat down and the sorting hat was placed on her head.

“Ah, a guest student,” said the hat. “Right then. You’re in the House of Kent at home I see. Which is equivalent to GRYFFINDOR.”

Snape took the hat off her and directed her to their table. Crystal happily took a seat next to Hermione across from Harry.

“Oh, I’m glad that’s over,” said Crystal. She laid her book on the table which immediately got Hermione’s attention. “What did he mean though, the Colonies?” said Crystal, looking a little insulted. “I believe we’ve come far enough-“

“Don’t take it personally, Crystal” said Ron. “Dumbledore is just old enough to probably remember them as colonies.”

Harry was glad that Crystal laughed.

“So you’re reading *Hogwarts, A History*,” said Hermione.

“Yes,” said Crystal. “Harry bought it for me.”

Hermione looked at him oddly. So did Ginny.

“You never read it yourself and now you’re buying it for other people,” said Hermione, not without sarcasm.

“I don’t need to read it, Hermione,” said Harry with a smile. “I’ve got you.”

Apparently that satisfied Hermione because she smiled back at him then turned to Crystal.

“You must be Hermione Granger,” said Crystal. “Harry told me about you. I love books too. I was practically drooling over Harry’s library.”

“It isn’t my library,” said Harry but the girls had ignored him. They had both submerged themselves into discussion about the book.

Later, as Hermione and Ginny, who had been looking at Crystal cautiously, settled her into the girl's dormitory, Harry pulled Ron aside in the common room.

"He's threatening you with turning Sirius?" said Ron, utterly aghast. "That'll never happen, Harry. How could you even think that?"

"I'm just not sure how far Sirius would go to protect me, Ron," insisted Harry. "And Voldemort's been able to manipulate so many things in my life all ready."

"And now he's thrown Crystal into the picture," said Ron astutely.

Harry looked at him, puzzled.

"Well, it's obvious that you like her, Harry."

"It is?" said Harry, feeling his face go red.

Ron laughed. "If you saw your face just now, you'd see it."

"Great," said Harry. "And Voldemort's holding her father hostage now."

As they left for classes the next morning, Harry leaned down toward Ginny. "Look after her Ginny," said Harry.

Ginny glared at him. "Why? Is she stupid or something?"

Harry blinked at her. "No. I just remember the first time I got here. It can't be easy going to a new school in the middle of the year."

"Oh, all right," said Ginny and she huffed off.

Harry turned to Ron. "What's with her?"

Ron shrugged and Hermione snorted on the other side of Harry.

“I swear,” said Hermione. “You boys can be so dense.”

They went to Transfiguration and took their seats. Sirius entered a few minutes later.

“My name is Sirius Black,” said Sirius. “I am not a fully qualified Professor, so I’m instructing my classes to simply call me Sirius.” He glanced down at the list of students on the roll on his desk. “I see most of you are in Gryffindor.” Looking back at the class, he said, “As most of you know, I caused quite a stir a couple of years ago after I escaped from Azkaban – which is a place I urge you all to avoid – when I was allegedly hunting down Mr. Potter over there.”

“As the whole truth has been made public, I don’t expect any odd looks or curious whispering. Problem Mr. Weasley?”

Since Ron had been hiding his face to whisper something to Harry, Ron choked.

“Er – no, Sir,” said Ron.

“Good,” said Sirius. “I may not be fully qualified as a Professor,” Sirius continued. “But I am fully qualified at all – and I mean – all aspects of Transfiguration.” As a demonstration, he instantly became the large black dog and took a stroll around the room before changing back in front of his desk.

“The art of self transfiguration is very complex and dangerous, which is why it is monitored so heavily by the Ministry,” said Sirius. “It requires a great deal of Arithmancy and a large amount of magical talent. You shouldn’t even be learning it until your 6th year but I’ve been granted permission to whet your appetites on it now in case any of you are interested.”

“Why?” said Neville.

"Interesting question, Mr. Longbottom," said Sirius. He glanced around the room. "Can anyone tell me what some advantages could be for an unregistered Animagus, such as myself?"

Hermione's hand shot up.

Sirius gave her a look that was half amused, half frustrated. "Aside from the obvious, escaping from Azkaban, sneaking into Hogwarts and avoiding the dementers."

Since Hermione's hand didn't go down, Sirius sighed. "All right, Hermione."

"Spying, of course," said Hermione. She turned to the class as they murmured. "Well that's what Rita Skeeter was doing last year when she was making up all that stuff about Harry."

"And she's right," said Sirius. "Placing a very innocent looking animal at the right place at the right time, can produce some of the best information there is."

"As a dog, I can't communicate with humans but I'm still Sirius Black. I can hear and I can comprehend what is said around me. And I remember everything. I also gain the positive attributes of the animal. The keen senses of smell and hearing."

He looked up Harry. "I knew you were there, Harry," said Sirius. "If you had stayed 2 minutes more, I would have found you."

Harry knew he was talking about when he saw Sirius in Hogsmeade.

He turned back to the class and started detailing the benefits of different animals one could transfigure into and he had the class rapt until the very end.

As the bell rang, the class hesitantly got their books together.

"He's a really good teacher," said Ron beside him, looking impressed.

“I’m not-“

Pain exploded in Harry’s head and his hand hit his scar. The whole class stared at him as he hit his knees.

Chapter 15

Divide and Conquer

“Hello, Harry,” said Voldemort. “I guess I managed to sneak up on you.”

He had apparated right in front of Harry. Voldemort took a couple of steps back, out of the flinch zone to allow Harry to stand up.

“Very clever,” said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled.

“What do you want?” said Harry.

“Relax, my boy, I merely would like a word with your godfather.” He looked at Sirius. “Hello, Sirius.”

“NO!” shouted Harry.

“Harry, Sirius is a grown man and perfectly capable of speaking to whom ever he chooses,” said Voldemort. “What do you say, Sirius? Care for a little chat?”

Sirius leaned against the front of his desk, his expression unreadable. He told the rest of the class to leave, which they did in a hurry then turned to Voldemort. “I’ll listen,” said Sirius.

“No,” said Harry again. “Voldemort-“

Voldemort grabbed Harry’s chin. “You have a class to get to, Harry. Divination, I believe.”

He let go and Harry took two steps back.

“Go on, Harry,” said Sirius.

Harry was starting to panic. “But, Sirius-“

“Go,” said Sirius firmly.

Harry stared at Sirius. Sirius nodded toward the door and Harry dropped his gaze. He picked up his pack and sent Voldemort a glare.

“You know, Voldemort,” Harry heard Sirius say behind him. “If you keep showing up at the school where ever Harry is, you’re going to get caught?”

“By whom?” said Voldemort. “Albus can’t follow Harry around everyday.”

Harry was a total wreck by the time he reached Trelawney’s classroom. Was Voldemort going to start in on Sirius all ready?

Ron did his best to calm him down. “Harry, be serious. Sirius won’t turn. You know it. Voldemort’s just trying to scare you.”

Since Ron had actually used his name, Harry stared at him. Maybe, Ron was right. But by the time Divination ended, Harry was frantic again. Trelawney had been using the stars again to show how they could predict betrayal and for once, Harry paid attention.

He couldn’t bear not knowing. He raced to the Transfiguration classroom. Sirius wasn’t there. He went to Sirius’ office. He wasn’t there either. Harry asked several students and a couple of teachers but no one had seen him.

Harry was never so scared in his life. He returned to the Transfiguration class and Sirius looked up from his desk where he was shuffling through some papers.

“Oh, hi, Harry,” said Sirius.

Harry thought he was going to dissolve into a puddle of relief.

“What’s the matter?”

“What’s the matter?” echoed Harry incredulously. “What happened?”

Sirius looked up. "What do you think happened?" said Sirius with a shadow of a grin.

Harry walked very slowly toward the desk. "Sirius," said Harry and he almost choked on the word.

Sirius must have seen the anguish in his expression because he sighed and ran a hand over his face.

"Voldemort has some deluded ideas that I might think I could protect you, keep you out of trouble, if I joined him," said Sirius.

"And," choked Harry.

"And I don't know what was funnier, that idea or Voldemort's expression once I started laughing."

Harry had to lean on the desk, his relief was so great. Sirius got up and pulled Harry into his chest. "Harry, I would do anything to protect you, but that doesn't include betraying James or your trust to do it. I will die first."

"I just don't want that to happen either," said Harry.

Sirius held Harry at arms length. "He's going to keep trying though. Be prepared. He worked on your father for 6 months before you were born and used all sorts of threats and promises. If James could do, so can I – and so can you."

Harry nodded solemnly.

Hermione burst through the doorway at that moment. "Oh, thank God," she said seeing them both.

"What's wrong?" said Harry, noticing the tears in her eyes and the desperation in her voice.

"Ron's gone."

"What?" said Sirius.

“He’s not in the castle,” said Hermione. “Professor Dumbledore checked the map. He’s gone.”

Hermione started crying and Harry immediately stared at the floor.

Another nightmare.

Harry glanced around the compound. There was very little movement.

“Voldemort!” Harry called as he moved through it. He went to Voldemort’s tent and stopped dead just inside the flap.

They sat across a table with a chessboard between them.

“Oh, hi, Harry,” said Ron.

Voldemort looked up and met Harry’s gaze with a look that was so smug, Harry wished again that he could wrap his hands around Voldemort’s neck.

“Your friend is quite good, Harry,” said Voldemort. “He’s proving his worth as a strategist to me.”

Ron directed a piece to move and crossed his arms. The bishop destroyed the knight that awaited in the square and Ron said, “Checkmate.”

“Brilliant, Ron,” said Voldemort. “You will do.”

Ron got up smiling and passed Harry on the way out of the tent. “See you back at school,” said Ron.

Harry started to shake as he watched Ron leave. Not Ron. “What did you do to him?” said Harry in no more than a whisper.

Harry felt Voldemort enter the flinch zone but couldn’t look up. “I have done nothing but give him what he wants,” said Voldemort. “I have taken away what he has too much of.”

Harry swallowed hard and looked up. “What?”

“Competition,” said Voldemort.

“You couldn’t get Sirius so you took Ron,” said Harry dismally.

“Sirius will take some time I admit,” said Voldemort. “He will be worth it. But Ron was much easier.” Voldemort held a hand under Harry’s chin to hold his face up. “Judging by that expression, I may have chosen wisely.”

“What do you want, Voldemort?” said Harry very carefully.

“Harry, Harry, you know what I want,” said Voldemort.

Harry would die for Ron, he knew that, but agree to join Voldemort. Ron would kill him.

“What have you done to him?” said Harry again.

“He’s under the Imperius Curse, Harry,” said Voldemort. “He’s very happy. He doesn’t have to compete with his brothers – with you. All he has to do is serve me.”

Harry pictured Mrs. Weasley’s face. She was the only woman who had ever held him as a mother would have, the only one who cried for him. How could he face her...

“Let him go, Voldemort,” said Harry. “Please.”

“Are you begging, Harry?”

“Yes,” choked Harry.

“And what are you offering me in return,” said Voldemort.

“Another contract,” said Harry.

“You won’t agree to join me?”

Harry met his gaze. “Everyone keeps telling me I’m not ready,” said Harry.

Voldemort looked impressed. "All right, Harry. Let me hear what you're offering."

Harry's mind started moving as fast as he could make it.

"I will agree to write again every week. I will come when ever you signal and I will come back again at every break to be tested." Harry took a breath. "But you will let me return home after being tested and I will come back before the next start of school."

Voldemort took a step closer to Harry. "And me?"

Harry stood his ground. "You will agree to leave my friends alone – which includes any little chats you might like and you will not abuse Hedwig."

Voldemort considered Harry's words. "I will not stop talking to Sirius," he said.

"Sirius can take care of himself," said Harry. "I mean Ron, Hermione, the rest of the Weasley's and Crystal and her dad."

Voldemort looked suddenly pleased. "So that worked, did it?"

Harry ignored the fact that Voldemort as much as admitted that he had dragged them in on purpose. "Do we have a deal?"

Voldemort stepped into the flinch zone. "I think we just might, Harry."

Harry was forgetting something. He took a step back. Voldemort took a step toward him. What was he forgetting?

Voldemort grabbed his chin. "I agree to those terms, Harry," said Voldemort. "Do you?"

Harry squinted at him. There was something else. What was it?

Voldemort raised a hand to Harry's head. "Are we agreed, Harry?"

Harry started to shake. "Yes," he managed to say. "Agreed."

Voldemort let him fall to the ground and held out his hand. Harry shook it.

"Release Ron," said Harry.

Ron was leaning over him in only a matter of moments.

"Harry? Harry!"

"All right, Ron," said Harry.

"Yeah. What's going on?"

Voldemort laughed, that cold laugh that Harry could remember from his nightmares.

"You're very lucky, Ron," said Voldemort. "Apparently, Harry appreciates you as much as he does his godfather."

Ron looked at Harry. "What does that mean?"

"Harry just bargained for your life," said Voldemort. "We have a new contract thanks to you."

Ron looked horrified. "What did you agree too?" said Ron in a very shallow voice.

Harry told him and Ron looked the same as Harry felt. It was tolerable. Ron looked at Harry. "Until when?"

That was it! Harry cringed.

"Oh, no, Harry," cried Ron. "Don't tell me you didn't put a time limitation on the contract."

Harry was staring at Voldemort though, who looked triumphant.

"No!" shouted Ron.

“It’s too late,” said Harry.

“No,” said Ron. “We’ll make an addendum. It will last until graduation and then if Harry hasn’t joined you by then – then I – I-I’ll become a Death Eater.”

Ron had their complete attention then.

“Don’t say that, Ron,” said Harry.

“But he did say that,” said Voldemort.

Ron was looking resolutely at Voldemort.

“All right, Ron,” said Voldemort, holding out his hand. “You’ve just become a third party in the contract.”

Ron looked at the hand and shook it.

“I do not agree to that,” said Harry.

“You have no choice, Harry,” said Voldemort. “You made the contract for Ron. He made the addendum for you. Wizards honor. You can not take it back now.”

Harry thought Hermione was going to have a stroke over the contract until she heard that Voldemort had grabbed Harry before he had agreed.

“He put you in duress,” said Hermione.

“Well he put me in pain,” admitted Harry. “I don’t see-“

“Harry,” said Hermione. “It means you only agreed to the contract because you were forced to. I can find a loop hole now.”

“Oh,” said Harry. “I knew I could count on you. Will that make the addendum null and void too?”

“If the original is,” said Hermione. “Then yes.”

“Whew,” said Ron.

Hermione glared at both of them. “I wish you two would stop doing things without me,” she complained. “I hate cleaning up your messes after the fact.”

“Sorry, Hermione,” said Ron. “Maybe You-Know-Who is just scared to face you.”

Harry stared at Ron. Ron and Hermione continued to swap barbs but Harry’s mind locked in a state of comprehension. That was it. Voldemort never touched Hermione. Harry originally thought it was because her parents were muggles, but now Harry saw it. She was clever. She could run circles around his little mind games and she knew wizarding law as well as any adult.

Voldemort could deal with Ron. Had proven it. But he didn’t want to have to deal with Hermione Granger. Harry started to laugh.

True to form, Hermione did indeed find Harry’s loop hole. He was in fact “under duress” when he agreed to the contract. He was not mentally capable of making a cognizant decision in the state he was in.

Hermione worked up the entire defense for him and even wrote it down. Harry knew it wasn’t enough though.

“You have to come with me,” said Harry.

They were walking down the main street of Hogsmeade.

“Harry,” said Ron. “You can’t seriously be thinking of taking her with you.”

Hermione seemed thrilled. “Oh, yes. Of course I have to go.”

“We have to teach her to apparate first,” said Harry. “Why do you think I insisted on going on this visit to Hogsmeade?”

Ron didn't look happy, but as they made their way up the path that they had taken to Sirius' cave, he concurred. "But I still don't like it," complained Ron.

Harry sent Ron down into the woods and told Hermione what she had to do. It didn't take her nearly as long as it took Ron to get the hang of it.

"Wow," said Hermione. "It's pretty easy isn't it," said Hermione.

Ron grumbled something but Harry said, "We'll leave just after dinner. There usually isn't a big crowd and I want to make sure we have his complete attention."

"Oh, I think you'll have his attention all right," said Ron. "Why can't I come too?"

"Because I can't take both of you," said Harry. "I'm not even sure if I'll be able to disapparate from Hogwarts with Hermione."

"You will, Harry," said Hermione. "I know we'll be fine." She turned on Ron. "And you, stop being such a pessimist, I have everything covered."

"Just be careful." Ron looked at Harry. "Both of you."

Harry looked at Hermione. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, Harry. I'm ready."

"I'm counting on you."

"I won't let you down," said Hermione. She looked at Ron. "Either of you."

From Moaning Mertle's bathroom, Harry wrapped an arm around Hermione's shoulders. "I'm your focus, Hermione," said Harry.

She nodded. Harry closed his eyes, picturing the campfire and hoping this wasn't going to turn out to be a nightmare.

Harry wasn't expecting Voldemort to be sitting in his chair by the fire and both he and Hermione startled as they apparated.

"Ah, hello, Harry," said Voldemort. "An unexpected visit." He looked at Hermione. "And you brought a guest."

Hermione took a small step behind Harry and Harry looked back at her. "It's all right," he whispered.

"Is Miss Granger just as curious as you and wanted to see my compound, or is there something else?"

"Actually, we have a problem with the contract," said Harry.

"Do you?" said Voldemort, not sounding as surprised as Harry thought he would. "What is that?"

"Well, for starters it's not valid," said Harry. "We just wanted to make sure you were aware of that fact."

Voldemort chuckled as he stood up. Harry took an instinctive step back almost knocking down Hermione.

"Of course it's valid," said Voldemort. He looked to Hermione. "I'm assuming Miss Granger is going to tell me why she thinks it isn't."

Hermione must have mustered her courage because she took a step around Harry, facing Voldemort with determination. Voldemort had challenged her perceptions and it had her hackles raised, Harry imagined. Bad move for Voldemort.

"Yes," said Hermione. "Harry has made me his legal council and-"

"He has?" interrupted Voldemort.

"Yes, and-"

"So you speak for Harry on behalf of this contract?"

"Yes."

“Very well,” said Voldemort. “I’m listening.”

“You rushed through the agreement of the contract,” said Hermione. “You forced Harry to agree to the terms before he was ready.”

“How do you mean?” said Voldemort. “I didn’t hold a wand to his head. I wasn’t threatening his life.” Voldemort looked at Harry. “If you are talking about that stupid little duress clause, I assure you that Harry wasn’t afraid for his life.” He turned back to Hermione. “He knows I can’t kill him.”

“You touched him,” said Hermione. “He was in pain. His mental capacity was diminished-“

“Diminished capacity?” Voldemort started to laugh. “Is that your defense?”

“Yes, your touch-“

Voldemort grabbed Hermione’s face. “And have I just diminished your mental capacity, Miss Granger?”

Hermione looked suddenly at a loss for words. She shook it off, pulling away from him. “The community versus Nersus Vandike,” Hermione quoted, “Personal injustices toward one wizard-“

“Ah,” Voldemort cut her off and looked at Harry. “She’s done her homework.” To Hermione, he said, “But that was a Ministry trial,” said Voldemort. “I adhere to all the old powerful rules of magic. But I do not consider myself under any obligation to follow any of the Ministry’s new rulings.”

“Simonius versus Casius,” Hermione said. “Krand versus Pike. Both show how one wizard tortured another to get an agreement.”

Voldemort frowned. But Hermione wasn’t done. She named two more cases, which were apparently old enough for Voldemort to accept.

“Very well,” said Voldemort.

Harry suddenly found his wrists magically tied together.

“I will accept your contention of the contract.” Voldemort looked at Hermione. “Have a seat Miss Granger.”

As soon as she sat, the satisfied look she had been wearing was wiped off. She was tied to the chair instantly.

Voldemort looked down at Harry. “So what do we do now?” He glanced at Hermione then back to Harry. “Since I now have Miss Granger, I suppose we must make a new contract. She wouldn’t like being with me, I assure you, since I’d be forced to gag her most of the time.”

Harry opened his mouth to say something but Voldemort grabbed his face. Harry hit his knees. Voldemort looked at Hermione.

“Well, Miss Granger,” said Voldemort. “You are Harry’s legal council. Propose a new contract for him.”

Hermione was looking aghast now. She looked from Harry to Voldemort.

Harry nodded his head.

“Um,” Hermione started but she stopped as Voldemort lowered himself before Harry.

Harry stared into those red eyes. Voldemort’s other hand reached for his face. One hand touching him was barely tolerable but two...

“Go on, Miss Granger,” said Voldemort, without taking his eyes off Harry.

Harry could hear Hermione breathing heavy as she watched Voldemort.

“The same contract without the addendum and it ends at graduation,” she blurted out.

“I might accept that,” said Voldemort as a finger from his other hand touched Harry’s face. “With an added concession on Harry’s part.”

Harry had cried out which made Hermione make a sort of strangling noise as she sat there watching Voldemort torture him.

“What?” whispered Hermione.

Voldemort looked deep into Harry’s eyes. Harry knew he saw the pain he was in. Knew that he knew Hermione saw it.

Voldemort considered the question. “I think I’ll settle for Harry addressing me as “Master” for the duration of the contract.”

“Harry won’t do it,” said Hermione hoarsely. Harry could hear she was close to sobbing.

“He will if you say he will,” said Voldemort, running the finger down his face.

Harry was shaking so bad he was sure he was close to unconsciousness.

When Voldemort’s finger moved toward the scar, Hermione shouted, “NO. All right. I agree on Harry’s behalf.”

“You aren’t under duress, are you Miss Granger?” said Voldemort, his finger still moving slowly toward Harry’s scar.

“No, I’m fine,” said Hermione although she was taking great gasps of breath and almost choking on her words.

“Good,” said Voldemort. He released Harry and Harry hit the ground limply.

“It’s been very – interesting bargaining with you Miss Granger,” said Voldemort. “You know your law very well.”

Harry heard more than felt Voldemort walk away from him, the pain was so bad. Hermione's arms came around him.

"Oh, Harry, I'm so sorry." She was crying now. "I didn't know what else to do."

"It's all right, Hermione," said Harry, trying to push himself off the ground. "You did the right thing. You got Ron out of the contract and put a time limit on it."

"But," she sobbed, "But he tortured you because of me."

"I told you. That's one of his favorite past times. Don't worry about it. I'm used to it."

"But-"

"Hermione," said Harry. "Just help me to my tent. We can talk about it in there."

Hermione supported Harry into the tent and almost dropped him when she actually looked at the office. She settled him into the chair and looked around wide-eyed.

"Hermione," said Harry. "What was that last thing you told him I'd do?"

Hermione tore her eyes off the bookshelves and looked at Harry. The tears started again.

"Oh, I'm sorry Harry," she cried. "He was going to touch your scar."

"What did you agree too?"

"He said you had to address him as "Master," she said. "I couldn't bear to watch-"

"It's all right," said Harry. "I can deal with that."

"What?" sniffled Hermione.

“I just won’t address him.”

“Won’t that make him mad?” said Hermione.

“Fat lot I care,” said Harry. “Ron isn’t going to be too pleased with this though.”

Hermione moved to him and kneeled down by his feet. She looked up at him, leaning on his knees. “Harry, we should get out of here.”

Harry sighed. “I’m sorry, Hermione. I’m too weak to apparate us both back right now. When he touches me, especially for that long, it’s like he drains the strength right out of me.”

Hermione stared at him for a minute, then picked up one of Harry’s hands, staring at it

. Her mouth opened.

“What?” said Harry.

“Oh Harry,” said Hermione. “I can’t believe I didn’t realize it.”

“What?” said Harry. Hermione was just too clever not to take that statement seriously.

“Think about it,” said Hermione. “The connection between the two of you.”

“Hermione, I all ready have a headache. Could you just tell me.”

“Well, he’s getting more and more powerful, right,” said Hermione. “They said he would rise more powerful than before.”

“Yes, and...”

“And your powers have been growing very fast.”

“Yes, and...” Harry said getting as frustrated as when he talked to Voldemort.

"He drains you of strength when he touches you," said Hermione. "What happens to him?"

"I have no idea," said Harry.

"She figured it out," said Voldemort from the tent flap.

Harry's head still ached so he hadn't felt Voldemort enter the tent.

"What did she figure out?" said Harry.

"You're feeding magic off each other," said Hermione.

Harry looked up at Voldemort. He hadn't stepped further into the room but he was staring back. "You are stealing my strength?" said Harry.

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort. "I didn't know if it would work at first, but it does." Voldemort stepped into the room then. Harry flinched. "But you are young and your resilience is still remarkable so you recover from the process easily enough."

"But-"

Voldemort silenced Hermione with a glance. "But as Miss Granger mentioned, you are feeding off me also. The quick increase of your powers and the ease of your classes are not due to some simple growth spurt as Sirius would have you believe," said Voldemort. "Wizard's Maturity could not give you so much, so fast. It is the knowledge and the power you are getting from me, which also drains you."

Voldemort stepped over to stand over Harry. He looked down at him, an intense look in his red eyes. "The bond grows ever stronger between us, Harry," said Voldemort. "It's only a matter of time."

Very real fear gripped Harry. He didn't want to believe it. Voldemort must have seen it. He grabbed Harry's chin.

“Oh, Harry,” said Voldemort, searching Harry’s expression. “I refuse to accept your fear now. You aren’t even sure what you’re afraid of. I know it isn’t me. Let go of your fear and your hate. Time is still on your side.”

Chapter 16

Fear

Ron was waiting for them.

“Blimey!” shouted Ron. “Where the hell have you two been.”

Hermione was looking at Harry. Ron turned to him too.

“Harry?”

“I’m all right,” said Harry, and once again, didn’t mean it. The guilt that had been making him sick was back. The fear that Voldemort would win was real.

Ron wasn’t happy with Harry. Hermione had told him about the new contract and Ron made it known in no uncertain terms that he wasn’t happy about. Hermione apologized profusely. Harry said nothing.

“What’s wrong with him?” said Ron, looking at Harry.

Hermione told him about the magical transfers between them and what Voldemort had said.

“I think he’s a little worried,” said Hermione.

Harry stared at her. “A little worried,” echoed Harry. “Don’t you get it?” Harry was still in the grips of the most powerful horror he had ever felt. It was like a magical bond circled his chest. That the bond between Voldemort and himself was too strong. That Voldemort could win. There seemed no way out for him. “I can’t win,” said Harry hollowly.

“Harry, come back,” shouted Ron as Harry rushed out of the common room.

He ran blindly through the school and ended up in Myrtle’s bathroom again. Collapsing into a corner, Harry buried his face in arms. He wished he had a mother he could go to so bad his chest hurt even more than it had before.

But Voldemort had taken her away from him. He had taken his father away too. And now, Voldemort wouldn't stop until he had taken Harry too.

"What's the matter, Harry?" said Myrtle. She wasn't crying.

Harry didn't look up. He was afraid *he'd* start crying if she did. "Voldemort."

Myrtle sighed. "So the heir of Slytherin is making more people cry?" said Myrtle. "Don't let him, Harry. I've been crying for 50 years because of him."

"I wish I was dead."

"DON'T SAY THAT!" shouted Myrtle. "You have everything anyone could want. You're young and handsome. You're one of the most powerful wizards in the school, probably in the world. You have good friends. You have Sirius Black."

"Sirius," echoed Harry and finally looked up.

"Why aren't you out showing off in front of the girls? Playing tricks on the Slytherins like Sirius did?"

Why didn't you come to me?

A fresh wave of guilt flooded over Harry. Voldemort had done it again. He had Harry's emotions so screwed up, he didn't know who he was anymore.

Don't let him take you away from me.

Harry got up.

"That's the spirit," said Mertle.

Harry wasn't paying attention anymore. He splashed his face with cold water and stared at his reflection. "Pull yourself together, Harry," he told himself.

Are you in a hurry to face your destiny?

Time is on your side.

Anything can happen.

A 15 year old boy stared back at him but his eyes showed a vast amount of experience. Memories of pain, worry, desolation, neglect and loneliness appeared in his mind.

“You’re not alone anymore,” said Sirius from the door.

Harry dropped his head to stare at the sink. He didn’t even wonder how Sirius had found him. Ron and Hermione would have went straight to him and they would have checked the map.

“I know, Sirius,” said Harry. “Sometimes I just hate being Harry Potter.”

“We’ll come along then, Justin. I have some property in Bulgaria-“

Harry laughed. He couldn’t help it.

“Thanks, Sirius.”

Harry felt better by breakfast. He was determined not to let Voldemort screw up his life anymore than it already was and that included not letting him manipulate his emotions again.

Like Sirius had told him, “If James could do it so can you.” And so Harry would.

Ron and Hermione didn’t mention the night before nor the contract, so Harry started detailing how he and Sirius were going to move to Bulgaria.

Ron thought it was extremely funny and started calling him Justin.

When the mail came, Harry was glad there was nothing for him.

Ron choked on his toast though when he read the letter from his mother.

“What is it, Ron?” said Hermione.

Ron looked up at them with wide-eyed astonishment. "Percy's getting married."

"That's wonderful," said Hermione. "What's wrong with that?"

Harry started laughing at Ron's amazement. "Oh come on, Ron. He's not THAT bad."

Ron shrugged. "I can think so if I want. He's my brother," said Ron. "And neither of you ever had to share a room with him."

Harry could remember all the arguing he heard at the Leaky Cauldron when they had all stayed there before their third year.

"You're both invited by the way. And you can each bring a guest."

"When's the wedding?" said Hermione.

"Over the Easter break."

"Why so quick?" said Hermione.

"Maybe ole Perc knocked her up," said Fred, falling to a seat by Hermione.

Hermione turned red. Harry tried not to laugh.

Ginny who was sitting a couple spots down the table stood up and smacked Fred in the head which George and Ron found hysterical.

"What's going on?" said Crystal as she approached the table now too.

Harry was still smiling as he looked up. "Family squabble," said Harry. "Ginny," Harry called and she looked over at him. She was still standing. "I think you won that round."

"They should lay off Penelope," said Ginny. "She very nice and I'm finally going to have a sister."

Harry grinned at her then looked at Catherine as she nudged him.

"Oh," said Harry as he moved over to make room for her to sit down.

“Did you hear about the dance?” said Catherine.

“Dance? What dance?” said Ron.

“I heard about it too,” said Hermione. “But it’s probably just a rumor.”

“Well, in case it isn’t,” said Ron. “Will you go with me?”

Hermione stared at him and Harry burst out laughing.

“Well you told me to ask you before anyone else did and not as a last resort.”

Hermione was turning red again. She threw a napkin at Harry. “You, stop laughing.”

Harry stopped but was still smiling. “Well, are you going to answer him or not?”

When Hermione started to look around for something else to throw at him, Harry got the hint. “All right, I’m sorry.” He got up.

“Hi, Harry.”

Harry turned and smiled at Cho as she stopped beside him. “Hi Cho.”

“Are you going to demolish me too on Saturday?” said Cho.

“What do you mean?” said Harry, confused. He looked at Fred. “Do we have a game on Saturday?”

George started laughing.

“A game?” said Catherine with interest. “Quidditch?”

“Honestly, Harry, for team captain, you certainly should pay attention to the schedule,” said Fred.

“Are you captain of the team?” said Catherine.

“Harry is the team,” called Ginny.

Harry felt himself starting to turn red.

"Harry is the best seeker in the school," said Cho.

Harry turned to her and she winked at him.

"Try not to embarrass me too bad, ok, Harry," she said and walked away.

Hermione burst out laughing as she got up and collected her stuff. She laughed all the way to Transfiguration and Harry got annoyed.

"Just what is so funny?" said Harry.

"How's it feel to have three women fighting over you?" said Hermione.

She walked away into the classroom and Harry turned to Ron, puzzled. "What's she talking about?"

"No idea. Must be a girl thing," said Ron. "Come on, let's get to class."

Half way through class though, pain erupted in Harry's head. His hand hit his scar and the entire class jumped.

Harry looked at Sirius. He wasn't sure he could face Voldemort so soon. True, he had conquered the fear, well suppressed it anyway, but he wasn't sure he could endure another emotional trauma.

Voldemort signaled again and Harry stood up and went to Sirius' desk. Sirius' face was fraught with concern.

Harry leaned over the desk. "I don't know if I can do it," said Harry.

"You have to, Harry," whispered Sirius. "The contract."

"I know, but-"

Another signal. Harry sighed.

What a nightmare.

Harry stared into the fire. He felt Voldemort approaching from behind him and Harry remembered something else. *Don't address him. Don't address him.* He reminded himself and hoped that Voldemort wouldn't play his little semantics game.

Harry turned to face him. Voldemort didn't stop until he was right in front of him, staring down at him, searching his face.

"Good," said Voldemort. "I can see you have conquered your fear."

"Let's just say I suppressed it."

"I was worried, which is why I called you," said Voldemort.

"You were worried?" said Harry.

"Of course, Harry. I know how upsetting the truth can be."

The burning in his head was getting annoying so Harry took a step back. "Well I had a nice little chat with one of the first people you killed and she sort of snapped me out of it."

"Oh," said Voldemort with interest. "Who might that be?"

"Myrtle," said Harry. "She still haunts the girls bathroom."

Voldemort chuckled. "Harry, tell me you don't go around visiting the girls bathrooms."

"That's the only place in the school to guarantee anyone privacy," said Harry. "And she rarely cries in front of me anymore. She even helped me work out a clue for the Triwizard Tournament," admitted Harry. "Although if she knew she was actually helping you, it may have killed her again."

"So the ghosts at the school do like you," said Voldemort. "And for the record, I didn't kill Myrtle, the Basilisk did."

"Who let it out?" said Harry.

"Well that was a long time ago," said Voldemort. "Back when I hated all muggles."

“And you don’t now?”

“Let’s just say, I can’t be bothered with them now.”

“But you condone Lucius’ torment of them,” said Harry.

“Lucius is a purist and a bit fanatical about it,” said Voldemort. “But he amuses me with his exploits.” Voldemort was still searching Harry’s expression. “You are quite safe though. You’re mother might have been born to muggle parents but the Potter line is purer than most. And don’t worry about your friends. The Weasley line goes way back also.”

“What about Hermione?” said Harry.

“Regardless of blood line, Harry. All your friends are protected through you by me.”

“Protected from everyone but you.”

“Harry, Harry, you have them protected through the contract, remember.”

Harry almost flinched. He brought up the contract. “Now that you know I’m not going to need years of therapy to get over my traumatic experiences, can I go back to school now?”

Harry had hoped the sarcasm would amuse him enough to let the matter drop. He was wrong.

Voldemort did chuckle though. “If you ask properly,” said Voldemort.

Harry tried a different approach. “May I leave your exalted presence now?”

Voldemort laughed again. “Oh, I like that one, Harry, but do try again.”

“May I leave now,” said Harry and added the word with as much loathing as he could, which was quite a bit, “*Master*.”

Harry couldn't quite tell if it amused him or not. Voldemort reached out and took hold of Harry's chin.

"So it's to be that way, is it," said Voldemort. "Not at all or with contempt enough to anger me."

"You weren't very specific," managed Harry. "What did you expect?"

Voldemort let go of his face and Harry staggered back.

"I expect the respect I deserve," said Voldemort.

"Respect," choked Harry, "From me?" Harry laughed. He had to. "Be glad I use your name. There are a whole lot of other things I could call you."

Voldemort smile at this, totally puzzling Harry. He reached out and touched Harry's cheek. "Oh, I know, Harry. I know," he said. "And there is one thing that you *will* call me that will please me very much."

Harry stared at him. He didn't like that sound of that ominous threat. And Harry considered it a threat.

"But since you have a problem with using the word master, I will delete that clause from our contract."

"Can you do that?" said Harry.

"Oh yes. I have said it, you have heard it. That clause is now gone," said Voldemort.

Harry eyed him suspiciously. Voldemort chuckled.

"Harry, don't you trust me?"

"No," said Harry bluntly.

"Smart boy. But ask your lawyer," said Voldemort. "She'll tell you."

"Then I can go now?" said Harry.

“Yes, Harry,” said Voldemort then he chuckled. “You may leave my exalted presence.”

Harry left before he could laugh over that. He apparated back in front of Sirius’ desk.

“All right, Harry?” said Sirius.

Harry turned around the class was looking at him, but he was too curious. “Hermione, can someone delete part of a contract just by saying it in front of the other person?”

Hermione looked puzzled. “If the other person agrees,” she said. “Why?”

Harry laughed as he moved back to his desk. “He doesn’t like the way I say it,” said Harry.

Both Ron and Hermione caught on and they laughed too.

The rumor about the school dance turned out to be true, they found out at dinner. It was to be the day before the Easter break.

“So, who you going to ask, Harry?” said Hermione.

Harry had been staring at his Divination homework as if it were in a totally different language. “No one,” said Harry absently. He looked up at Hermione. “Did you ever give Ron an answer?” The two of them were alone in the common room. Ron was serving detention for Snape.

Hermione’s blush gave Harry his answer. He smiled at her and looked back down at his notes.

“Why not?” said Hermione. “I know a few girls who would love to go with you.”

“Hermione,” said Harry without looking up. “You know I can’t ask anyone to the dance.”

“Tell me why not?”

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He looked up at her. "You know that it isn't safe being my friend," said Harry. "Voldemort's already used Sirius, Ron and you. Imagine what he'd do if he found out I had an interest in a girl." Harry sighed again. "How could I do that? She'd be an instant target for him to use to control me."

Hermione looked stricken for a minute. "But the contract has all your friends protected," she insisted.

"My friends, yes," said Harry. "But there is no stipulation about girl-friends. Voldemort could play one of little semantics games and find a loop hole. Just like we did."

"So what are you going to do?" said Hermione.

"Well, I had to go the Yule Ball last year with someone, but I don't this time. I thought I'd just go by myself and dance with everyone," said Harry. "And hope that no is mad that I didn't ask them. You will save me a dance, won't you?"

"So Harry Potter can dance now?" said Hermione.

Harry knew she was teasing. "Sirius said he'd teach me," admitted Harry. "And I'd like to have some fun before I have to go back to be tested like a laboratory rat."

Hermione frowned at him. "You know, I'm really starting to detest that man."

"Join the club," said Harry.

Harry got some odd stares from some of the girls he knew but they stopped about a week later, as if Hermione had said something about that Harry was going to the dance alone. Harry hoped she wasn't saying why, but he was grateful that he didn't have to suffer through telling anyone who asked him no, because no one asked him.

His first dance class was a fiasco of fun. They had made room in the DADA classroom and Remus, Ron and Hermione were there. Sirius and Remus decided Ron needed lessons too after watching him attempt to dance with Hermione.

“Come on, Harry,” said Remus, after he had stepped on Hermione’s foot again. “Your father was a natural at this. Your mum too.”

There was a knock at the door and Professor McGonagall popped her head around the door. “Oh dear. Am I interrupting something,” she said.

“Not at all, Minerva,” said Sirius, trying not to laugh. “Dance lessons.”

Prof. McGonagall’s brows rose and she entered looking with interest at Harry and Hermione.

“Stop looking at your feet, Potter,” said McGonagall. “Miss Granger stop trying to lead.”

Sirius stood up. “Perhaps an example,” said Sirius. He held out his hand to McGonagall. “Professor, would you like to show them how?”

McGonagall looked flustered for a second then put her hand into Sirius’. Remus looked like he was biting his lip very hard to keep from laughing. He put the music back on and Harry watched.

They made it look so simple. Professor McGonagall was pointing out little things as Sirius lead her around the classroom.

Ron jumped out of his chair and grabbed Hermione’s hand. “I think I got it.”

“Very good, Mr. Weasley,” said Professor McGonagall who seemed to have taken over the lesson.

It was true too to Harry’s dismay. Ron looked perfectly at ease now dancing with Hermione.

Harry’s face must have shown his disappointment because Prof. McGonagall frowned at him. “Come here, Mr. Potter,” said McGonagall. She took his left hand and put his right hand on her waist. “No look at me.”

Harry looked at her face. She gave him sort of an odd smile as she laid a hand on his shoulder. He felt her push against his left hand and Harry took a step.

“You know, your father was an excellent dancer,” said McGonagall, not releasing Harry’s eyes. “I think he made a point of dancing with all the women teachers at every dance just to show off. Of course Sirius did too. The pair of them were quite irrepressible. And of course, Remus just leaned back and laughed.”

Harry continued to look into McGonagall’s amused expression, only some what aware that they were circling the room. He saw Ron and Hermione circling toward them and sort of shifted direction to keep from hitting them, but he kept his focus on what McGonagall was saying.

“Didn’t Remus dance?” said Harry.

“Course he did,” said McGonagall. “He just loved watching the pair of them. Your mother used to get frustrated with them and grab Remus to dance with. That of course always got your father’s attention.”

Harry turned them again.

“He was quite possessive by their last year, even with his friends.”

Harry was so interested in what he was hearing, he hadn’t noticed that the music had stopped.

“Very good, Mr. Potter,” she told him with a smile.

Harry looked around. Both Sirius and Remus were smiling at him. “What did I do?”

“You were dancing,” said Hermione, looking proud. “And quite well.”

The next few lessons were just as fun and just as productive. And the dance was fast approaching.

“Are you avoiding me, Harry?”

Harry turned and saw Catherine staring at him with a somewhat hurt look.

“No,” said Harry. “Why would I?”

“Maybe because I still don’t have a date for the dance,” said Catherine.

Harry blinked at her, hoping he wasn’t turning red. “You mean no one has asked you?”

“I was hoping you would,” said Catherine.

“But-But, I thought Hermione had told you, er,” Harry started stammering pathetically.

Catherine stared at him. “You mean it’s true,” she said. “You really don’t want to ask anyone because you’re afraid it will put them in danger.”

“Well you saw him,” said Harry. “Just what you saw him do to me, put you and your father in danger.”

Catherine suddenly looked horrified. “He’s ruining your life,” she whispered.

“My life?” muttered Harry, feeling cynical. “What that nightmare I wake up to every morning?” He saw her expression and was instantly sorry. “I’m sorry. I just don’t want to put people I care about in danger.” He caught her gaze. “You will save me a dance or two or three won’t you?”

Catherine smile, something he said making her feel better. “Of course, Harry. If I can get through all your other female admirers.”

Harry laughed that one off but not an hour later he found another girl staring at him as if he were some sort of monster.

“Hi, Cho,” said Harry. He immediately saw that she was irritated and when he found out why, he started going through the whole explanation again. “I’m sorry, Cho. I should have said-“

“Oh, Harry,” said Cho, looking distraught. “I’m sorry. I should have realized-“

“Don’t Cho,” said Harry, feeling awkward. “How could you know? Just promise to save me a dance.”

Cho flung her arms around him and hugged him. “I will Harry,” said Cho. “I will.”

Harry stared at her as she moved off down the corridor. Then he went hunting for Hermione. He told Hermione what happened and she looked as if she was going to burst out laughing.

“Hermione,” Harry begged.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” said Hermione. “But I told you.” She cast a sideways glance at him. “You’re not going to even get a chance to sit down at the dance.”

Harry felt like strangling her, but true to her prediction, Harry was dancing every dance – each with a different girl. He couldn’t say he wasn’t enjoying it though. As long as they kept up a steady flow of conversation and Harry didn’t think about his feet, he never missed a step.

Harry finally got the chance to escape and get something to eat. He fell into a chair next to Ron who looked at him with a combination of jealousy and awe.

“What?” demanded Harry, hoping he wasn’t going to get a dose of Ron’s bitterness.

“Nothing,” said Ron, watching Harry pile some food onto a plate. “I’m just impressed.”

Harry cast him a glance. “Dare I ask?”

“Well you seem to be – well it looks like you’re having –“

“Spit it out, Ron.”

“Well, until you looked at me, you were smiling,” said Ron. “You were having a good time.”

“Sorry,” said Harry. “It’s just—”

“I know. The way I acted so jealous last year, I don’t blame you.”

Harry started eating. “Forget it Ron. It isn’t easy being my best friend but I don’t know anyone who could do it a better than you do.”

Ron was silent for a few minutes after that. His eyes seemed to be searching the dance floor.

“Who are you looking for?” said Harry.

“Hermione,” said Ron. “I haven’t seen her in a while.”

“Lost her have you?”

Ron smirked at him, probably because Ron had said the same thing to Viktor Krum last year in his jealousy. And since Hermione had turned herself out quite stunningly tonight, Harry could guess Ron was just as jealous again, even if she had come with Ron.

“Oh, no,” muttered Ron.

“What?”

“She’s dancing with that Cretan from Ravenclaw.”

Harry turned to see she was dancing with the Quidditch captain of the house. Harry didn’t consider him a cretan but could understand Ron’s point.

“Help me, Harry,” said Ron. “Go rescue her. I’ll look like a fool if I try to cut in.”

Harry almost laughed, then almost choked on it.

Don’t blow this for me, Sirius.

I need you, Sirius. Please come.

“Just like I would do for you, Harry,” Sirius had said.

Ron had just asked him...

Harry got up and grabbed Pavroti. “Dance with me for a second, Pavroti” said Harry pulling her toward the dance floor. “I have to rescue Hermione.”

Pavroti appeared pleased as Harry led her around the floor toward Hermione. Then she seemed pleased again at the partner Harry was going to present her too.

“Wow, thanks, Harry,” she said.

Harry smiled at her. “No, thank you for helping so quickly.”

“You didn’t give me much choice.”

“Sorry,” said Harry but he was still smiling. He stopped beside the other couple and tapped Roger’s shoulder. “Mind if I cut in?” Harry didn’t wait to see. He grabbed Hermione and twirled her away.

“Oh, thank you, Harry,” sighed Hermione.

Harry grinned down at her. “It wasn’t me. Ron got all jealous and asked me to save you.”

“He did?” said Hermione, turning red but looking pleased all the same.

Harry wanted to laugh but a nudge on the shoulder stopped him. He turned his head and was looking at Ron. “Mind if I cut in?” said Ron.

Harry did laugh then. He passed Hermione to Ron and looked down at his new partner.

“So this is what it takes for me to get to dance with famous Harry Potter.”

Harry laughed as he wrapped an arm around Ginny and spun her away from Ron. “Where have you been, Ginny?” said Harry. “I’ve been looking all over for you. Of course I wanted to dance with you.”

Ginny's face took on that becoming reddish glow again. "I haven't been hiding. But my toes may never recover from dancing with Neville so much."

Harry laughed again.

"Harry?"

"Yes, Ginny?"

"Is it true?" said Ginny. "What Ron said about why you wouldn't ask anyone to the dance?"

"Yes," said Harry.

"Um."

"What is it?"

Ginny looked up at him hesitantly. He met her gaze. "Would you have considered asking me?"

Harry stared at her. Her face was turning pink again and he finally understood what Hermione had said about having three women fighting over him.

"Ginny, your family is the only family I've had before Sirius," said Harry. "They took me in when I had no one. You're like my sister."

"I'm not your sister," said Ginny almost venomously. "I've got enough brothers."

"I know," said Harry.

"Then what's wrong with me?"

Harry blinked at her. She sounded like him for crying out loud. "Nothing," he insisted. "There's nothing wrong with you." He felt defensive on her part now that she was looking up at him with a dejected expression. Harry wished he didn't know how it felt.

He let go of her hand and gently raised her chin. "Ginny," said Harry. "You are brave – you stood up to Voldemort for me. Loyal – you comforted me and supported me when I ran away into hiding. You're also strong and compassionate."

Harry felt her hand fall onto his shoulder and lightly brush his hair by his ear. A jolt of electricity went through him as if he had just been hexed.

Still those eyes looked up at him as if she would die if he let go of her. His arm tightened around her instinctively.

"Harry, I–"

Pain exploded in Harry's head and his hand left her face to hit his scar.

"Are you all right?"

"Walk with me," said Harry. Ginny took his arm and they moved toward the hall. Harry's hand went to his head again and he felt Ginny's hands tighten around his arm.

Once they were outside the castle, Harry let go of Ginny and slumped against the wall.

"He's calling you, isn't he?"

"Yes."

She made a strangling noise. "You have to go, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Harry," cried Ginny.

"It's all right," said Harry. "I shouldn't be long. Tell Ron to wait up for me. OK."

"I will."

"Thanks, Ginny," said Harry. "And," he reached out and touched her face, then couldn't think of anything to say. "Well, thanks."

What a nightmare.

Harry stared into the fire. He could all ready feel Voldemort approaching. Turning as Voldemort hit the flinch zone, Harry said, "Well that was rather rude of you."

Voldemort's eyes traveled over Harry in his dress robes. "Ah, the dance," said Voldemort. "Were you enjoying yourself?"

"Actually, yes," said Harry. "Your signal scared the hell out of my dance partner though."

"Oh dear," said Voldemort. "Who was it? I'll have to send the dear girl a note."

Harry almost laughed. "Yeah, I might tell you," said Harry. "What do you want, Voldemort?"

"Ah, I see Hermione has told you that the contract has been successfully modified."

"She did. Can we get on with it. I still have a few dances left if I get back on time."

"Harry, Harry, are you in a rush to leave me?"

Harry blinked at him. "Let's see." He looked at his left hand. "A room full of pretty girls." Harry looked at Voldemort then at his right hand. "Or you? Let me think."

Voldemort smirked.

"I'll be seeing you tomorrow anyway," said Harry. "I'd like to get back."

Voldemort puzzled Harry by smiling again.

"Why did you call me?" said Harry curiously.

Voldemort chuckled again. “The arrangements for you and Crystal coming back to camp tomorrow. Since she can’t apparate, you will take the train with her and I will arrange to have you both picked up.”

“Fine,” said Harry very glad it was something as simple as that. “Can I go now?”

Voldemort grabbed his face. “You’re not being very nice, Harry.”

“So who said I was nice,” said Harry, as he slowly slid to his knees.

Voldemort laughed. “Go back to school, Harry,” said Voldemort.

Harry was too frustrated and too irritated to return to the dance so he went back to the common room.

He looked around the empty common room and hung his head. Harry’s trunk was all ready packed. We went up to the dormitory and sat down on his bed. Rowan flew into his chest.

Harry looked down at her. *He ruined the dance for me anyway,* thought Harry.

Rowan made a sad, beautiful noise.

Harry fell onto his bed, Rowan still holding onto his arm.

“My life is a nightmare,” said Harry.

Chapter 17

The Test

The train ride back to Kings Cross was uneventful. Catherine and Harry waited at the platform wondering who was going to meet them.

“You don’t think *he*’s going to come, do you?” said Catherine.

Harry wanted to laugh. “I highly doubt it, Cathy,” said Harry. “This is too menial a task for him. Aside from the fact that I doubt he’d want to be seen in such a public place.”

“Potter.”

Harry turned and saw Malfoy step up to them. “What do you want, Malfoy?” At least his thugs weren’t with him.

Just then a stately looking gentleman in his 50’s approached and bowed curtly to the group of them. “Master Draco, the car is waiting,” said the man.

“Very good, Wilson,” said Malfoy. “Come on, Potter. This is your ride.”

Great, thought Harry. He took Catherine’s arm and followed Malfoy and Wilson out of the station. Two porters had joined Mr. Wilson and took their trunks. When they started putting them into the back of a white stretch limousine, he looked at Malfoy.

“This yours?” said Harry.

Malfoy grinned smugly. “Yeah, family car.”

Since Harry had never even seen the inside of a limousine, he didn’t feel like starting something. “Impressive.” Was all he said.

Malfoy looked a little taken aback by Harry’s comment so he opened the door. “So let’s go then.”

The three of them climbed in and Malfoy seemed to enjoy showing off because he started playing host as Wilson got behind the wheel and pulled away from the curb.

Malfoy showed them all the muggle gadgets it was equipped with then some of the wizarding components. He opened a compartment and handed them both a butterbeer.

Harry's curiosity was burning. *Where are we going?* He wanted to ask so badly his stomach started to hurt. Catherine kept up a pleasant stream of questions about the car, which kept Malfoy occupied. At least he was being nice to her. He only gave Harry a glance every so often, which made Harry think he was just waiting.

When the car stopped in front of a huge house and a horde of people converged on the car, Harry grew anxious. Their luggage was dragged into the house, which could have been called a miniature castle and people started welcoming *Master Draco* home.

Harry looked at the house. "This is *your* house?"

Malfoy practically beamed with pride. "Yes," said Malfoy. "Jealous, Potter?"

"I'm not staying here," said Harry. Stay with the Malfoy's? What a nightmare that would be.

"But you will and you are," said Lucius Malfoy. He grabbed Harry by the hair and pulled up his face. "The Master is not at the camp and I've been instructed to babysit his pet until he returns."

"I won't," said Harry furiously. "It's not in the contract. I don't have to."

His wrists were magically tied together and Lucius dragged him up the garden lined front walk, still by hair.

"Those are the orders and you don't have any say in the matter," growled Lucius, dragging Harry into the house. "And while you are in my home, you are mine to deal with so—"

"You can't make me," said Harry.

Lucius cuffed him across the side of the head and Harry hit the marble tiled floor.

“Don’t talk back to me, boy,” said Lucius. “And, yes. Indeed I can make you. The master may take your crap because he mistakes it as courage, which I don’t doubt you have, but I won’t.”

He hauled Harry off the floor and pulled him into an adjoining room, which appeared to be a parlor. Lucius gave him a shove forward and Harry staggered a few steps then turned back to face him. *This is worse than a nightmare.* But Lucius couldn’t really touch him, could he?

“What about Catherine?” said Harry.

“Catherine is going to her father via floo powder,” said Lucius.

“I’m supposed to go to Voldemort,” insisted Harry.

“He said you were to stay here and you will.” Lucius left and closed the door. Harry heard him lock it.

He stared at the door then looked down at his bound wrists. *Great. Just Great.*

Harry tried to apparate home but it didn’t work because Lucius had magically tied him. Harry tried to magically untie his hands but couldn’t. He vainly tried the doorknob but it was locked and when tried to use his wand on it, it still didn’t unlock.

With hope, Harry opened a window. They were barred. When he couldn’t get rid of the bars he fell into a chair with frustration. He brought his hands to his head, feeling the ache. There was blood on his fingers. Lucius must wear a ring because he cut him every time he hit Harry.

Well, if he touched Harry again, Harry was going to fight back. He still had his wand and-

The door opened and Harry stood up prepared to battle if necessary. Harry recognized the woman who entered with a tray as Draco’s mother.

“Hello, Harry,” she said nicely enough as she set the tray on a table.

Harry looked at the meal. She walked up to him. "Er- thank you, Mrs. Malfoy," said Harry. He raised his hands expectantly.

"I'm sorry," said Mrs. Malfoy. "That has to stay. And I'm to take your wand."

Harry took a step back. "No, I don't think so."

"Just give it to me," pleaded Mrs. Malfoy. "You don't want to make Lucius angry."

"I make Voldemort angry all the time," said Harry. "Why should I care about your husband?"

"Just give me your wand."

Harry pulled it out and pointed it at her. "No. Just get out of the way and let me leave."

"*Expelliarmus!*"

Harry's wand flew from his hand to the door where Lucius Malfoy stood, looking enraged.

"Leave us, Narcissa," Lucius told his wife in a very foreboding voice. She rushed out of the room and closed the door behind her.

Harry stood his ground as Lucius took a step into the room.

"You disobeyed my wife then threatened her," said Lucius.

"I didn't threaten her," said Harry. "I just wanted to leave."

"But I told you that you can not leave," said Lucius. He grabbed Harry by the chin. "My touch doesn't put you in agony as the master's does." He shoved Harry into a corner onto his knees and his bond hands became attached to a small ring. "But I have my own ways."

Harry looked over his shoulder to glare at Lucius. "You can't touch me," said Harry.

Lucius instantly gagged him, then strode over to him. He bent over him and held up his face, exactly the way Voldemort did.

“Can’t I?” said Lucius. “And why would that be?” He had a strange smug expression on his face. “Could it be that you would tell Voldemort and I would be severely reprimanded?” He actually smiled. “Would you do that, Harry? Run to Voldemort? Oh, how that would please him.”

Harry blinked at him, feeling confused suddenly.

“He has given you his almighty protection. How it would please him to know how readily you use it.”

Lucius released his face and held up his wand. He muttered something and little white sparks started spitting out of it. He moved behind Harry and Harry strained his neck to look at him. Lucius flicked his wrist and it felt as if tiny razors had slashed across Harry’s back.

The shock of it made him scream but it was muffled in the gag. He dropped his head and the razors slashed again.

Harry couldn’t believe it. Lucius was whipping him. Voldemort *would* go berserk.

“Will you go running to Voldemort, Harry?” he heard Lucius and the pain hit again. “Will you admit, accept that you want his protection, need it?”

Again the razors slashed. Harry felt like his back was on fire. The gag fell away.

“Tell me to stop, Harry,” said Lucius as he cracked his wand again.

Harry was shaking, his bond fists balled. Between anger and pain, his thoughts were in chaos.

Lucius didn’t stop though. Harry lost count how many times he had been hit and he tried to focus. What the hell was going on now?

“Tell me to stop,” said Lucius. “One word and I will. I don’t disobey the master without accepting the punishment. The master’s pet is under his protection and no one can touch him but he himself. Will you use his protection?”

Harry felt blood running down his back, felt the burning across his skin. His body jolted as the razors slashed again. Then it stopped.

Harry felt his chin being lifted and he stared up into Lucius’ cruel gaze. He didn’t have enough strength to glare.

“Still conscious? Impressive,” said Lucius. “But then the master said your tolerance to pain must be greater than most.” Lucius moved his hand from his chin to his hair as he held Harry’s face up. “I didn’t think you’d stop me. And I don’t think the master will hear anything about this.” He dropped Harry’s head then kicked him in the chest. “I think you might understand now.”

Harry heard him leave. “No one enters this room but me,” he heard Lucius yell just before he slammed the door and locked it.

He wasn’t sure how long he knelt there, enduring the pain and staring at the ring that his hands were bound to.

Lucius words came back to him. *Run to Voldemort. The masters pet. Accept his almighty protection.*

Harry sincerely wanted to see Lucius Malfoy pay for this, but knew he wouldn’t. He’d have to accept this. Malfoy was right. Voldemort would love to have Harry turn to him for this.

Harry slumped against the wall. Misery had settled over him. He closed his eyes and tried to think about Sirius. He thought about how he, Sirius and Remus had sat in the living room reading his parents letters.

The door banged open, spoiling his reverie.

One glance showed Lucius Malfoy closing the door behind him and a house-elf scurrying toward him with a satchel. Since he was still holding his wand, Harry didn’t look at Lucius.

"What does master want Ferry to do?" said the house-elf.

"Just clean up the blood and cover it," said Lucius as he moved to stand over Harry.

Harry continued to look at the floor. Ferry, apparently the house-elf's name, ripped open the back of Harry shirt and the fibers tore from his shredded skin. Harry couldn't help the cry of pain.

Ferry gasped. "Master Lucius, this is very bad. Does master want me to heal it?"

"No, Ferry," said Lucius. "Just do what I told you to do. I want him to remember it."

Like Harry would forget it.

Lucius watched as Harry's back was administered too. He seemed to enjoy seeing Harry's pain as much as Voldemort did. "When you are done, feed him."

Still looking at the floor, Harry said, "I'm not hungry."

Lucius grabbed Harry by the hair again and jerked up his face. "What did you say?"

"I don't think I can eat," said Harry, doing his best not to glare.

"My wife loves to cook, Harry," said Malfoy. "She went through a lot of trouble with this meal. You *will* eat."

Harry dropped his gaze and nodded.

Ferry covered his back the best he could and taped up his broken rib then he magically mended Harry's shirt. Harry figured that one rib must be extremely weak by now, it had been broken so many times.

As Ferry attempted to feed him, Harry wondered how he was going to hide all of this Voldemort. The man had eyes, after all. He could see when Harry was in pain.

When Lucius came in later that night, Harry felt completely beaten.

Lucius unbound him from the ring but didn't untie his wrists. Harry struggled to his feet, clutching his rib and leaning against the wall.

"What's wrong with him, Father?"

Oh, great. Draco.

"He must have eaten too much," said Lucius with amusement. "I told you not to come in here."

Draco nodded and left.

Harry glanced up at Lucius who looked back with satisfaction.

"Yes, I believe you understand, now," said Lucius.

"More than you know," said Harry. "May I go to sleep now, Lucius?"

"Who gave you permission to use my name?"

Since he sounded angry, Harry repressed blaming Voldemort. "Sorry," he muttered.

"But-"

"No time," said Lucius and Harry's binds fell off his wrists. "The master has called."

Lucius had no sooner said the word master when pain exploded in Harry's head. All ready dealing with the pain from his back, Harry hit his knees.

"Oh, my," said Voldemort, taking several steps away from Harry.

Don't look at him. Don't look at him.

"Harry, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," said Harry. Lucius helped him to his feet blocking Voldemort's view.

"Good," said Voldemort. "Back to the camp then."

“No,” said Harry. “You breached the contract.”

“How did I do that?” said Voldemort with interest.

“I was supposed to go back to you. You never said anything about being sent to anyone else.”

“Harry, Harry,” said Voldemort in that annoying patronizing tone of his. “I told you last night that I was arranging for you and Catherine to be picked up. You didn’t ask where or by whom.”

“You didn’t say I had to stay here,” argued Harry.

“You weren’t interested in the details,” said Voldemort. “You simply agreed.”

Harry opened his mouth then closed it. Voldemort was right. He simply wanted to get back to the dance.

Voldemort chuckled. “Come then.”

“Can’t you just test me now and get it over with?”

“Harry, it’s too late to start that now,” said Voldemort. “I’m tired and you don’t look very awake yourself.” Voldemort took a closer look then. “Actually you look terrible. What happened?”

“This is a big house, Voldemort,” said Harry, his mind racing. “I got lost and fell down a trick staircase.”

Voldemort turned to Lucius. “I told him not to wander around by himself but the boy is too curious for his own good.”

“It’s just a scratch,” said Harry, trying to sound indignant. “I’ve had worse.”

Voldemort stared into Harry’s face. Harry finally looked away.

“Something isn’t right, here,” said Voldemort. “Back to camp - *now*,” he told Lucius.

Another nightmare.

“Sit down, Harry,” said Voldemort.

Harry looked at the plush chair in front of the fire and had to keep himself from shuddering. He couldn’t lean back. “I’d rather go to bed if you’re not going to test me.”

Voldemort stared hard at him again. Could he see that Harry was in pain? He didn’t show it. “All right, Harry. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Harry made toward his tent.

“What’s wrong with your stomach?”

“Mrs. Malfoy is a good cook,” called Harry. “I think I ate too much.”

Harry put off leaving his tent. He had collapsed onto his bed on his stomach the night before but didn’t sleep very well.

Voldemort’s signal finally got Harry moving. He moved across the camp slowly, dreading the encounter. Lucius was already there and he didn’t look too happy. *Great.*

Harry put some food on a plate and moved toward them picking at the food on his plate with his fingers.

He approached the fire, still not looking up.

“Harry, you are up late,” said Voldemort.

“I was tired,” said Harry by way of an explanation.

“You still look tired. Sit down.”

Harry continued to pick at his plate. He broke off a piece of bacon and ate it then glanced at his chair.

“The master told you to sit,” said Lucius.

Harry sighed and sat down on the edge of the chair, still staring onto his plate.

“Harry?”

“What?” said Harry.

“What ever is wrong with you?”

“Nothing,” said Harry. “I’m fine.”

Voldemort stood up and walked toward Harry. He stopped just within the flinch zone. Harry didn’t look up. “Don’t lie to me, Harry. I can tell.”

Harry gave him a quick glance. “Look I just want to get home. Ron’s brother is getting married next week and I’d like to go if you test me by then.”

“I don’t think that’s it,” said Voldemort. He took a step closer. “Tell me what’s wrong, Harry.”

Harry stared at his plate. “Nothing is wrong, Voldemort.”

“Why don’t I believe you, Harry?” He turned to Lucius. “Lucius, what have you done to the boy?”

“Me, My Lord?” said Malfoy. “I don’t think he cared for the arrangements but the boy was no trouble while he was with me. I have no idea what’s bothering him.”

Voldemort eyed Lucius too. “Why don’t I believe you either?”

“Master-“

“Silence,” said Voldemort. He was looking between Harry and Lucius with a look that was far from pleasant. “I will hear the truth now or someone suffers.”

“There’s nothing to tell,” said Harry.

Voldemort grabbed Harry’s face. Harry wretched it out of Voldemort’s grasp with a cry of pain and hit the ground.

“Nothing to tell?” said Voldemort, staring down at him. “Harry, my pet, I don’t believe you.”

Harry didn’t have the strength to respond.

“As I thought,” said Voldemort. “Tell me now, Harry, or there will be consequences to deal with.”

Harry stared at the ground, willing him to leave.

“Very well,” said Voldemort. Harry felt him leave and groaned as Lucius helped him up.

“I don’t know whether to thank you or to tell you how stupid you are,” said Lucius.

“You should have let Ferry heal me,” said Harry. “Voldemort knows when I’m in pain. He can see it.”

“I know,” was all Lucius had to say.

Lucius was helping Harry to his tent when Voldemort signaled.

Lucius turned with Harry and they saw Voldemort dump Draco Malfoy on the ground. “I told you I would have the truth or someone suffers,” said Voldemort.

Draco looked up at his father.

“No Master,” cried Lucius, falling to his knees.

“I swear,” said Draco. “I don’t know what happened in the parlor.”

Voldemort chuckled. “Oh, I believe you, Draco, my boy. I just want to know what did happen.”

“Master-“

“Quiet, Lucius,” ordered Voldemort and looked at Harry. “I will hear it from Harry.”

Harry looked at Lucius, who looked horrified, to Draco, who looked terrified, to Voldemort, who looked madder than hell. Draco was going to be the one who suffered if he kept quiet.

“Draco is not your friend, Harry,” said Voldemort. “He is not protected by the contract. Will you watch him suffer by your silence?”

Voldemort raised his wand.

Draco was a lot of things, but he didn't deserve to be punished for what his father did.

"Lucius beat me," said Harry.

Voldemort cast him a glance. "Why would he do that?" he said returning his gaze to Draco.

"I didn't want to stay. Mrs. Malfoy brought me a tray and told me to give her my wand. I wouldn't do it," said Harry. "I guess Malfoy got mad."

"Is that what happened?" said Voldemort, looking to Lucius.

"Yes, my lord."

"So why are you protecting him, Harry?" said Voldemort. "You are under my protection."

Harry bit the inside of mouth to keep from answering.

"Harry wouldn't stop me, my lord," said Malfoy. "He wouldn't accept your protection."

Voldemort turned to Harry with a look of surprise. "You didn't use my protection, Harry?"

Voldemort sounded hurt again and Harry wanted to wrap his hands around his neck again. He was manipulating him again. Harry wouldn't let him.

"I can take care of myself," said Harry.

Voldemort looked at Lucius. "What did you do?"

"I lashed him."

"WHAT?" said Voldemort, then controlled his voice. "How many times?"

“I wasn’t counting,” said Lucius.

Voldemort turned to Harry. “Was he conscious through it?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“How did he take it?”

“He screamed the first time I hit him and then only after the house-elf tore the shirt off his back,” said Lucius. “You’re right, master. He has a great deal of endurance.”

Harry still refused to look up. They were talking about him as if he were an animal. Voldemort’s pet and Harry couldn’t bear it.

“Harry,” said Voldemort. Harry didn’t look up. “Harry!”

Harry’s chin was jerked up to meet the red eyes. Lucius was the one holding his face so Harry didn’t feel pain, but he was forced to look into Voldemort’s face.

“Do you not want my protection?” said Voldemort.

Harry opened his mouth, ready to say no.

“Think hard, Harry,” said Voldemort. “I can not punish Lucius if you don’t accept my protection. If my Death Eaters know you don’t want my protection, I can’t keep them from hurting you.” He paused. “Or your friends.”

Harry stared at him. Voldemort reached out and touched his face. Harry shut his eyes. He was in such pain...

“Do you want my protection, Harry?”

Harry heard the question again. Protection from his Death Eaters. He could take any thing they threw at him – but his friends.

You are protected through the contract.

The contract?

“Yes,” said Harry weakly.

What about my friends?

Why they are protected by me through you by the contract.

“Say the words, Harry.”

Harry swallowed. If he didn’t accept Voldemort’s protection then his friends wouldn’t be safe from the Death Eater’s either. Voldemort was bound to the contract, but the Death Eaters weren’t unless Harry accepted Voldemort’s protection.

“I want your protection,” said Harry shallowly.

Voldemort held a hand under Harry’s chin to hold his face up. “Very wise, Harry,” said Voldemort. “You have passed the first test.”

Harry had only vague recollections of being brought to his tent. He thought he had heard screams of pain – which he hoped was Lucius – but couldn’t be sure. He remembered hearing Severus’ voice and Catherine’s. He remembered a lot of pain.

He felt only a small amount of pain now as he opened his eyes.

“Harry?” said Catherine.

Harry almost groaned again. *Not again.*

“I’m all right,” said Harry.

“You keep saying that!” said Catherine, sounding mad. “But you never are!”

Harry sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“You keep saying that too. Stop it!” Catherine was clutching Harry’s hand. “It took hours for Severus to stitch up your back and he says that you’re still going to scar.”

Scars were the last thing on Harry’s mind. He had passed the first test, Voldemort had said. Just how many were there?

Harry pushed himself to his feet.

“What are you doing?” cried Catherine. “Lay down.”

Harry leaned against a chair to steady himself. “I have to see Voldemort,” said Harry.

Catherine grabbed his arm. “They are all closed in the conference tent.”

Harry looked at her and sighed. That meant they could be in there for hours.

“Harry-“

“Could you please give me some time alone,” said Harry softly. The emotions running through him were too strong, he didn’t want to deal with a girl he happened to like.

“Um, sure Harry,” said Catherine, although she looked at him worriedly. “Are you all right.”

“Yes. I just need to think.”

Catherine left and Harry almost over-turned his desk, he was so furious. *You have passed the first test.*

Voldemort’s words kept running through his mind. So did Malfoy’s. *Accept the master’s almighty protection.*

Harry needed to calm down. He was letting Voldemort’s manipulations get to him again. He needed an outlet. He turned to the book shelves. Hermione always looked to books. Harry grabbed the first one he reached.

Surprisingly, it was a book about birds. Harry looked up phoenix’ and saw a font of information in front of him.

Harry got a phoenix? This is too weird.

Remus, will you keep your mouth shut for a change.

Harry heard the voices in his head and started looking at the book in earnest for the reason why Rowan had chosen him. He read about the song of The Phoenix, the tears of The Phoenix – both of which he knew – but the Order of The Phoenix Harry could find little about.

Harry had about six books open on his desk. He still couldn't find the answer. All he had figured out was that Rowan had picked him and that gave him the Order of the Phoenix.

“What does it mean?” said Harry.

Harry slumped in his chair holding his head in frustration. Voldemort would probably know, he thought. Voldemort would tell him. But he was tied up with his Death Eaters.

He ran a hand through his hair, looking down at the book open before him.

Pain erupted in his head. Harry looked up.

“Harry,” said Voldemort. “You figured out how to call me.”

Chapter 18

Rowan

“I did?” said Harry.

Voldemort looked at the books strewn about the desk. “You did. Twice.”

“How?” said Harry.

“That’s what I’d like to know,” said Voldemort.

“Is the meeting over?” said Harry, looking at Severus who had entered with Voldemort.

“No, Harry,” said Voldemort approaching Harry’s desk and peering down at it. “This is more important.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to know how you called me,” said Voldemort. “I heard you call my name.”

Harry didn’t like the sound of *that*. Voldemort was looking so thrilled that Harry felt a chill go down his spine.

“What were you doing just now?” said Severus.

Harry turned to him. “What? Oh, I was frustrated because I couldn’t find what I was looking for.”

“Were you touching your scar?” said Severus.

“Um, well maybe,” said Harry. “I was staring down at the book with my head leaning on my hand.”

“And what were you thinking?” said Severus.

Harry glanced at Voldemort then back at Severus. “That Voldemort would know.” He sent another hesitant look at Voldemort who looked

so pleased that Harry's stomach clenched up. "That he would tell me, but he was in the meeting..."

"Do it again, Harry," said Voldemort eagerly.

Harry was afraid to try, seeing how pleased Voldemort looked. "I don't know if I can."

"Try," said Voldemort. As if seeing Harry's nervousness, he added, "We will call this your second test. I will only give you three."

Harry sighed. Elbows on the desk, he rested his head on his hands, as he had done earlier, his right palm over his scar. *Voldemort can tell me*, thought Harry.

Voldemort starting laughing with delight.

Harry looked up with alarm. "What did you hear?"

"Just you saying my name," said Voldemort.

While Harry was happy that Voldemort couldn't actually hear his thoughts, it still disconcerted him that Voldemort could here him call.

Voldemort reached across the desk and gently grasped Harry's face. Harry's gaze locked in those red slits. "The bond grows ever stronger," said Voldemort. He released his chin and turned to Severus. "Come, we will finish the meeting." Then he turned back to Harry. "I will return after to answer your questions, Harry. You have made me quite proud. Your last test will be tomorrow and then you can return to your friends."

Harry watched him sweep out of the tent and foreboding swept over him. Harry could call him now. Harry didn't like it. *The bond grows ever stronger*.

Harry shook it off. Turning back to his books, he determinedly searched them so he wouldn't have to ask Voldemort. But he still couldn't find his answers. When Voldemort re-entered the tent, Harry was frustrated again.

Voldemort settled in a chair in front of the desk, just outside the flinch zone. “So what is the problem?”

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I can seem to find out what the Order of The Phoenix is.”

Voldemort appeared interested. “Why would you want to know?”

Harry stood up and began to pace, not liking the way Voldemort was looking at him. “Well I was told it isn’t normal for a Phoenix to fly in your window, burst into flames and then tell you she’s yours.”

“Who has this happened to?” said Voldemort. Harry didn’t look at him, but he could tell Voldemort was watching him.

“Me,” said Harry. “Over the Christmas break.”

Voldemort sat up. “A Phoenix has adopted you?”

He sounded so surprised, Harry turned to look at him. “Yes.”

“Then why isn’t it here?”

Harry blinked. “Should she be here?”

“Of course,” said Voldemort. “If she picked you, she would want to be where ever you are. In all likelihood, she is probably searching for you.”

Harry stared at him.

“Call her and she will find you,” said Voldemort.

“Call her?” said Harry. “How?”

“Just call her.”

Harry looked at him skeptically and he chuckled. Harry turned to the tent door. “Rowan,” called Harry. He looked back at Voldemort. He chuckled again but within a matter of moments, Rowan swooped into the tent.

Harry held out his arm astonished as Rowan landed on it and began to berate him in song.

“She’s mad at me,” said Harry.

“Of course she is,” said Voldemort. “You are hers the same as she is yours. She would be most annoyed that she didn’t know where you were.”

Harry looked with surprise at Rowan. She had grown some and her plumage had darkened to scarlet and gold, Gryffindor’s colors.

When Rowan finished yelling at him, she nestled her face into his neck beneath his ear. Harry stroked her and turned to Voldemort. “So what is this Order then?” said Harry.

“What did Sirius tell you when you got it?” said Voldemort.

Harry wasn’t sure he liked talking about Sirius with Voldemort, but he wanted to know what the Order was. “Sirius said it belonged to me. Remus said it was weird. But when I asked why, Sirius told Remus to keep his mouth shut.”

Voldemort chuckled over that one. “Have any other Phoenix’ giving you special attention?” said Voldemort.

“Well Fawkes usually likes me,” said Harry. “He’s the only other Phoenix I know. He’s the one who gave the feathers for our wands.”

“Ah, Albus’ bird,” said Voldemort, standing up. He was watching Rowan curiously as she cuddled under Harry’s chin. “Usually?” said Voldemort.

“He attacked me after I came back from hiding,” admitted Harry.

“What did he do?”

“Well he grabbed me and started crying all over me,” said Harry. “His tears hurt me. Dumbledore said it was because of my guilt.”

"Ah," said Voldemort. "Fawkes tried to cleanse you of your guilt." He stared hard at Harry. "I take it, it didn't work."

"No," said Harry, curious again. "Dumbledore said I was too strong."

"Indeed," said Voldemort, taking a step toward Harry and Rowan. "You would need a phoenix of your own to have any effect over such a deep rooted emotion."

"So you think, Dumbledore sent it to me."

"Oh no, Harry," said Voldemort. "Only a phoenix can choose." He reached out and stroked the bird. Rowan let him. "But you should let go of your guilt."

Harry looked at Voldemort. "How can I?"

"Because it isn't your fault."

"I saved Pettigrew," insisted Harry. "All this – you - *is* my fault."

"Harry," said Voldemort, taking hold of Harry's face. Harry sank to his knees and Rowan jumped onto his shoulder. "Didn't Albus tell you about choices?"

Harry nodded weakly. Rowan started crying and Harry's pain went away, even though Voldemort still held his face.

"You stopped Sirius and Remus from killing Wormtail," said Voldemort. "But they didn't have to let you." Harry blinked at him. Voldemort shook his head. "Harry, they are two grown men, intent on killing the man who betrayed your parents and their trust, yet they let *you* decide. They chose to give you the choice." Voldemort let go of him and stepped away. "A choice I wouldn't have given to a thirteen year boy, but they did it none the less. They are as responsible as you for Wormtail returning to me."

Harry considered this as he grabbed the desk and pulled himself to his feet. Sirius could have just killed him as he intended to before Remus came in. They didn't have to give Harry the choice. But they did. Harry had been riddled with guilt now because they had given

Harry the choice. Harry was angry suddenly. How could they do that to him?

Harry sat down and Rowan perched on the back of his chair. He stared at his books laid open on the desk.

“Ah yes,” said Voldemort. “But we have strayed from the subject. You wanted to know of the Order.”

Harry looked up. Again interested. “Before when you touched me, Rowan started crying and the pain went away.”

“She will not let you suffer, Harry,” said Voldemort. “Which is why she was so angry that she couldn’t find you.”

“So will you tell me?” said Harry.

“Will you beg me, Harry?”

Harry dropped into his chair with frustration. “Then get out,” said Harry.

Voldemort chuckled and leaned over Harry’s desk. “Do you want me to leave Harry or do you want to know?”

“You know I want to know,” said Harry.

Voldemort laughed his cold little laugh. “So tell me, Harry,” said Voldemort. “What do you know so far?”

Why did Voldemort have to make things so hard? Sometimes it was like talking to Hermione.

“We belong to each other,” said Harry. “She doesn’t want me to suffer.”

Voldemort sat back down to Harry’s relief. “What else?”

Harry wanted to throw something at him. Couldn’t he just spit it out? Then Harry got it.

Fawkes was *telling* him to let go of his guilt. Rowan *told* him that he wouldn't feel the pain. And last year, the phoenix' song *told* Harry not to let go of his wand. They were *ordering* him.

Harry looked at Voldemort and he nodded as if he saw the moment Harry had gotten it.

"She can order me around?" said Harry.

"Not quite," said Voldemort. "She can guide your emotions to protect you. She can't tell you to jump off a bridge or anything like that."

"And me?" said Harry curiously.

"What have you read?" said Voldemort.

Harry thought hard, looking at Rowan. "Well all phoenix' can choose to heal anyone they like," Harry said. "And from what I've read, their song can calm even the most violent mob." Harry looked at Voldemort. "Are you saying I can order her to do these things for me?"

"Yes, Harry," said Voldemort. "Even if she doesn't like it, if you tell her too, she will do it."

Harry looked up at Rowan, on the back of his chair. "Is that true, girl? You would do those things for me?"

Her song told him that he was an idiot for doubting it and Harry laughed.

"There's more, Harry," said Voldemort.

Harry looked up from stroking Rowan. "What?"

"If that phoenix stays with you, then you have one life per cycle."

"What does that mean?" said Harry.

"It means, Harry," said Voldemort. "That you can save a life. If someone dies, even if you hate them, you can save them within one hour of their death."

“By ordering the phoenix?”

“Yes, Harry.”

Harry was looking at Rowan as Voldemort got out of his chair and moved to leave.

“I take it I have satisfied your curiosity.”

Harry was still lost in Rowan’s golden eyes. “Yes, thanks,” said Harry. Then he recalled something else. He glanced toward Voldemort who was walking away.

“Voldemort?” said Harry. He turned to him. “You didn’t actually tell Malfoy to whip me, did you?”

Voldemort looked surprised. “Oh, no, my boy. And he has been severely chastised for that. I merely told him to be hard on you. Had I known his intentions were so harsh, I dare say, I would have given the task to some one else.”

“What did you do?” said Harry curiously.

“Lucius was punished,” said Voldemort simply. “And I had his son lashed in front of him.” He gave Harry a strange sort of smile. “You may find some satisfaction in knowing that young Mr. Malfoy passed out after about 5 strokes, while I was told you endured almost 50.”

Harry shrugged but he did feel a little smug about the knowledge. “By the way, what’s the last test?”

Voldemort turned to the door. “The Killing Curse,” he said and he left the tent.

Chapter 19

The Wedding

That got Harry's attention. He got up and followed Voldemort out of the tent. "I won't kill anyone for you," said Harry vehemently.

Voldemort turned around so quickly, Harry had to step back. Voldemort grabbed his face anyway. "Harry, have I told you kill anyone?"

"No."

"Nor do I expect you to be able to perform that particular curse fully, especially without a wand. But it will be a very good test to judge accurately just how far your powers are progressing."

"But—" Harry's knees were already on the ground. He hadn't thought to call Rowan.

"Of course, I can't make you," said Voldemort, staring hard into Harry's eyes. "But then I guess you will miss the wedding because that is the last test. And you can't leave without my saying you have been tested."

Voldemort released him and walked away.

"Harry, are you alright?" Catherine rushed over to him.

"Yeah," said Harry, pushing himself to his feet.

Catherine was still with him when Voldemort signaled Harry out into the camp.

"This is going to be a nightmare, Cathy," said Harry as they exited Harry's tent into the compound.

"It'll be all right, Harry," said Catherine. "I know it will."

Harry sent her a doubtful glance then looked at Voldemort. "I told you that I won't kill for you," said Harry very softly.

“I don’t expect you to, Harry,” said Voldemort. “You aren’t ready. But be patient.”

“Voldemort-“

“Harry, this is only a test. You don’t have the power yet without a wand to kill.”

Harry stared at him.

“So what’s the test?” said Harry cautiously.

“You will hit a wizard with the Killing Curse without a wand and we will see what happens.”

“I don’t like this test, Voldemort,” said Harry softly. “I-I could get sent-“

“Harry, you’ve already done two of the Unforgivable Curses. Are you worried about going to Azkaban?”

“Honestly, Yes!”

“Harry, Harry, you are under my protection, remember,” said Voldemort.

I still don’t like this. Thought Harry. “So what do I do?”

“This particular curse takes a large amount of power to cast, which is why I doubt you will succeed in any sort of life threatening situation. It will also drain you. Meaning you will become weaker the longer you hold it on your victim.”

Harry looked up into those red eyes. “Who is my victim?”

“Lucius, of course, Harry,” said Voldemort.

Harry turned and saw Lucius Malfoy stepping out onto the field.

“Voldemort-“

“Enough stalling, Harry,” said Voldemort. “Look at me.”

Harry looked back at him.

"I have to make sure you can say the words," said Voldemort.

"But-"

"Harry, look at me and say them."

"I know the damn words-"

Voldemort grabbed his face. "Harry-"

"*Avada Kedavra*," said Harry.

"Very good," said Voldemort. He let go of Harry and walked away.

"So, what do I do?" Harry cast a glance at Lucius who was looking at him with a very nasty look on his face.

Voldemort studied Harry. "Well, for you, my pet, I'd start with your temper."

"You just did."

Voldemort chuckled. "You have managed to throw the Cruciatus Curse well because of it, so I would assume, you can be provoked enough thought to get a response from the Killing Curse."

"So what are you saying, Voldemort," said Harry. "You want to make me mad enough to kill some one?"

"No, Harry," said Voldemort. "This is a test. You know you can't actually kill. But setting off your temper will be the best way to get the results I'd like to see."

Severus had come up to stand beside Harry and Harry turned to him. "I wish he'd speak in plain English sometimes."

Severus pushed Harry out into the field. Harry looked at Lucius Malfoy.

"Why are you doing this?" said Harry.

“My master told me to. And you deserve retribution.”

Harry stared at him. Was Lucius prepared to take whatever Harry had because Voldemort said so?

“So go ahead, Harry,” said Voldemort.

Lucius’ expression changed immediately. The cold cruel stare was back. “How’s your back, Harry? I hear Severus couldn’t keep it from scarring.”

Harry tried to stay calm. “Scars don’t bother me,” said Harry. “I heard Draco couldn’t-“

“Good thing you accepted the master’s protection,” Lucius cut him off. “I would have gone straight for that that Mudblood friend of yours.”

“My friends are protected now,” said Harry.

“Yes,” said Lucius. “But it would have been so fun to drag your friend Hermione here.”

Harry’s blood started to boil. “You can’t touch her.”

“Now, I can’t,” said Lucius. “But if you hadn’t accepted the masters protection...” Lucius laughed.

Harry saw what was coming.

“I would have grabbed her so fast,” said Lucius.

Harry saw red.

“How many lashes could she take, Harry?”

The thought of Hermione being whipped sent rage through Harry. He raised his hand.

“*Avada Kedavra!*”

Harry saw a flash of green light and hit the ground hard on his knees. He looked up and saw people running toward Lucius, who was also on the ground. *Oh God, tell me I didn't kill him!*

Harry stared at Lucius, still on the ground. Harry felt so weak he could have fallen over right then and there but he had to watch Lucius.

Severus approached Lucius. "Drowning effect," said Severus as he proceeded to administer CPR. Lucius took several deep breaths.

Harry watched the scene from his knees. He felt as if Voldemort had just touched him, he had no strength.

"Come along, Harry," said someone who grabbed his arm and pulled him to his feet.

"Is Malfoy all right?" managed Harry.

"Yes," said the Death Eater. "You have pleased the master but the power behind the curse has weakened you. You must rest."

"Malfoy is ok?"

"Yes, Master Harry," said the Death Eater.

"Then I can leave now," said Harry. He hadn't intended to say it out loud.

"No," said the Death Eater. "The master hasn't dismissed you, nor are you strong enough to leave."

Harry stared at the book with frustration. The words wouldn't register. He was fully recovered from yesterday's test. He had been told he had passed it 'admirably.' Why hadn't Voldemort sent him home yet?

"Master Harry?"

Harry's stomach clenched up at the voice. He didn't look up. "What do you want, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Please come with me."

Harry noticed the respectful tone, then realized that Lucius had called him *Master Harry*. Harry looked up. "Why?"

"The master wants to see you," said Malfoy.

"Voldemort knows how to call me," said Harry.

"But you don't always come when he calls," said Malfoy. "So Lord Voldemort commanded me to come and get you."

"Why?"

Malfoy looked as if he was starting to get annoyed. "I don't believe he is done punishing me yet."

And sending him to get Harry politely would be punishment, Harry considered. "What does he want?"

"I don't know."

"Then forget it," said Harry. "I've jumped through all his hoops already. I'm not playing any more of his games."

"Please, Master Harry," there was a hint of urgency in his voice now. "Don't make me go back and tell him you wouldn't come with me."

"Stop calling me that," said Harry.

"That is the address the master has told us to use so we must use it. And I will beg you to come with me if necessary," said Malfoy. "Draco is with him."

Harry looked up. Lucius looked genuinely concerned for his son. It struck a nerve. Sirius had begged for Harry too.

Take him. You're the only one who can.

Are you begging, Sirius.

Yes, damn it. Take him.

He ran a hand through his hair and stood up. "All right."

“Thank you, Master Harry,” said Lucius as they moved through the compound. “Perhaps he will let you leave after he sees you today.”

Harry sent him a glance. He could hope anyway.

Harry went through the flap first. Voldemort stood up from his large chair as he entered and Draco looked up from a subdued position on a nearby couch. Lucius came in behind him.

“Ah, Harry,” said Voldemort. “Come in.”

“Are you going to dismiss me yet?” said Harry.

“Soon, my boy. I have one more test for you.”

“You said you would only give me three.”

Voldemort chuckled. “I lied.”

“I thought you had no use for lies,” said Harry, his anger growing.

“Little use for lies,” said Voldemort. “When they serve my purpose, they are convenient.”

“So what is it?” said Harry. It came out more like a growl. He didn’t especially like having this confrontation in front of the Malfoys.

“First, I’d like you to show Draco your back.”

“What?” It surprised Harry. “You’re kidding?”

“Harry, have you ever known me to ‘kid’?” said Voldemort.

“Why?” said Harry. “So Malfoy can gloat?”

“No, Harry. So you can.”

“Me?” said Harry. This had to be a joke. “Well I don’t want to so forget it.”

“Then do it because I want to boast.”

“You?” Now Harry wanted to laugh. “Is this the test? Trying my patience?”

“Just show him, Harry.”

“No.”

“Harry, why do you argue with me?”

“Because no one else dares,” said Harry. “And I wouldn’t want to deprive such an exalted presence from the mental stimulation.”

Voldemort laughed but took a step towards Harry. “You know I can make you.”

“Then you’ll have too,” said Harry.

Voldemort sighed. “Stubborn,” he said. “Why won’t you just do as you’re told?”

Harry glared at him. “For you, I will do what I *have* to do. For Sirius, I will do what he says,” said Harry. Something Harry said seemed to make Voldemort mad. Harry pressed on. “He is my guardian.”

“But I am the one who protects you, Harry,” said Voldemort.

“Only from the Death Eaters. No one but you and them has ever tried to hurt me.”

“But Sirius can’t keep you from me, can he?”

Harry wasn’t sure where this conversation was going. He only knew that Voldemort didn’t seem happy about Harry talking about Sirius. Harry still wished the Malfoy’s would go away.

“Sirius supports me, Voldemort,” said Harry. “If I had gone to him first, before that contract-“

“But you didn’t,” Voldemort interrupted. “You came to me.”

“Only because I’m not used to caring-“

Harry cut himself off. He wished he could take the words back.

Voldemort nodded. "Or having people care about you. I do know Harry. You know I do."

Voldemort was working on Harry's emotions again. Harry was getting dizzy.

"This test, Voldemort," said Harry. "Can we get on with it so I can go home."

Voldemort grabbed Harry's face. "I told you, Harry," said Voldemort as Harry slowly sank to his knees. "This is your home."

"La Casa Black is my home," said Harry.

"Stubborn.' Voldemort stared into Harry's eyes. "Lucius, show your son Harry's back."

Harry stared up into Voldemort's face. He was going to make Harry do it. Voldemort didn't let Harry look away as Harry felt his shirt torn up the back. He heard a surprised gasp.

"How does that make you feel, young Mr. Malfoy?" said Voldemort.

"Glad my name isn't Harry Potter," said Draco.

Harry choked on his laugh.

Voldemort smiled at him. "Ah Harry, you are cynical enough to find that funny." He looked at Draco. "But Draco, doesn't that make you feel inferior?"

"Inferior, My Lord?" said Draco with confusion. "Because my body is smart enough to shut down-"

"Ah," said Voldemort. "It isn't the body, Draco, it is the mind. The will to endure, to persevere. Harry has that. You do not."

Harry couldn't see Draco's face but didn't expect that Draco looked too happy.

“Don’t you want to please your father, Draco,” said Voldemort.

“Of course.”

“As any good son, you want to make him proud.”

“Yes.”

“And are you proud of your son, Lucius?” said Voldemort.

Harry had no idea what was going on. Voldemort still had a hold of Harry’s face and wouldn’t release his gaze. Harry was getting dizzy again.

“Of course, my lord,” said Lucius. “He does exceptionally well in school. He does what he’s told.”

“So he is a good boy,” said Voldemort. “But do you like him?”

“He is my son, my lord. I love him.”

“Yes, yes,” said Voldemort. “But do you like him? When he is at school, do you miss him? Do you sit and talk with him? When he has questions, do you take the time to answer them? Do you protect him?”

“Of course. That is what a father does.”

Harry felt like a knife had pierced his chest. Sirius was right. Voldemort was trying to take his place.

“And when he is bad, when he disobeys, what do you do?” said Voldemort.

“I punish him, of course,” said Lucius.

“Of course,” said Voldemort. “Thank you, Lucius. You and Draco may leave now.”

Harry heard them leave but was still trapped by Voldemort’s grip and his steady stare.

Voldemort nodded at Harry. "You understand, now, Harry. Don't you?"

He let go of Harry and went back to his chair. Harry leaned on one hand, pressing the other to his head. He still felt dizzy. Voldemort had held onto him so long.

"If you think that you can replace Sirius then you're deluded."

Voldemort chuckled. "Harry, Sirius is an established entity in your life. I can't replace him."

Harry pushed himself to his feet and leaned on the desk to face Voldemort. He couldn't mean... "You can't mean my father?"

"Have I not been acting as one?"

Harry glared at him.

"I have given you my protection. I have given you all my attention, my knowledge. Have answered all your questions. I provide you with food and shelter. I have given you my strength," said Voldemort. "Tell me, Harry, have I not been like a father to you?"

"There's more to being a father than that," said Harry. He was more confused than angry now. What was Voldemort trying to do now?

"How do you know?"

The knife in his chest felt like it just twisted. He didn't know. "I don't" whispered Harry and he weakly pushed off the desk and walked toward the entrance of the tent.

"Harry?"

"I'm leaving now, Voldemort," said Harry.

"All right, Harry," said Voldemort. "You may return to Sirius."

Harry still felt dizzy as he stared into the fire in the living room. Sirius had been casting Harry worried looks since he had gotten home

yesterday but seemed wary to disturb Harry's thoughts. And Harry's thoughts weren't happy ones.

Voldemort *had* been acting like a father all year. Harry had been going to *him*. True Voldemort had been manipulating everything to suit him but Harry hadn't been able to stop him. Harry was losing.

"Come on, Harry," said Sirius.

Harry glanced at his watch. It was time to go next door for the wedding. Harry had been informed that Percy had asked if Harry would be an usher. Penelope's bridal party was so large. Sirius had agreed on Harry's behalf.

The whole of the Weasley's yard was strewn with chairs and decorated as only wizards could. At the back, where people were assembling to be shown to seats, Harry saw the Weasley men.

"Go on, Harry," said Sirius. "You'll be fine."

Harry nodded and walked over to them.

"Harry," said Percy, shaking his hand. "I'm so glad you made it."

"Thanks for asking me, Percy."

"You're part of the family, Harry," said Charlie. "As big as it is."

Harry forced a smile.

"Alright, Harry?" said Ron, studying him.

"Yeah," lied Harry but Ron didn't look like he believed him. Well he would talk to Ron later, if Harry made it through the wedding without passing out. He still felt dizzy. What had Voldemort done to him this time?

Harry escorted many people to seats in the vast garden. Many Ministry people were there. Harry avoided Fudge but Bagman made a fuss.

“Told everyone your wouldn’t turn,” said Bagman. “I knew it. Just because the ambassador didn’t come back.”

“He found out the truth and Voldemort wouldn’t let him leave,” said Harry.

“Knew it. Knew it,” said Bagman. “You hang in there, Harry. We’re counting on you.”

Harry directed him to a seat and went back to the welcome area. It seemed as if the entire wizarding community was there. When the time was approaching, Harry felt someone grab his arm and pull him to the side.

“Come here, Harry, I have to fix you.”

Harry looked down at Ginny. “Why? Am I broken?” said Harry automatically.

Ginny was looking at Harry’s bow tie, which she was straightening. “Are you?” she asked seriously.

Harry sighed. She had noticed his withdrawal too. “Feels like it,” he said.

“Well, don’t worry. I’ll fix you up.”

She brushed his hair behind one ear and Harry’s shoulder hit his ear.

Ginny smiled. “Harry, are you ticklish?”

“Guess so,” said Harry.

Ginny continued to fuss over him. She tried to calm down his hair and Harry felt that jolt again as her hand brushed the back of his neck. She straightened his collar and adjusted his boutonniere. Harry just stood there and let her. When she looked up at him, she smiled.

“There,” she said. “You’re all better now.”

“I am?” said Harry.

“Yes. You’re not alone anymore, Harry,” said Ginny.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley opted to let Harry escort them to their seats. A great honor which Harry contributed to that they wanted to show the wizarding world know that the Weasley family was behind Harry Potter.

“You know, Harry,” said Mrs. Weasley on their way down the isle. “When you move to Bulgaria you can always change your name to Weasley.”

“We wouldn’t mind,” said Mr. Weasley.

Harry felt dizzy again. “Thanks,” said Harry and looked up at them. “I mean it. Thank you.”

Mrs. Weasley looked like she wanted to hug the stuffing out of him again but Mr. Weasley stopped her. “Sit down, Molly.”

Harry left them and returned to the back.

The bridesmaids and ushers were lining up. Harry took his place beside Ginny and Ron, in front of him turned around.

“All right, Harry?”

“I-I’m just-“

The music started and everyone focused on the front. Ginny grabbed Harry’s arm. “You’ll be all right Harry,” said Ginny. “I’m here.”

Harry could only nod and he squinted as he and Ginny set off down the isle. He took his place beside Ron and was glad there was a chair behind him because he leaned on the back of it twice during the ceremony, which was a complete blur.

Harry put on a happy face as the newly married couple walked back up the isle and as he walked up it with Ginny again he searched for Sirius. He found Sirius looking back worriedly. Harry sent him a pleading look and continued to the back. Once there, he continued

using every drop of endurance he had to stay conscious and still look happy.

Once everyone was being directed to the canopies set up in the Weasley's back yard, Harry felt his knees going weak. He would have hit the ground if Sirius' arm hadn't come around him.

"I've got you," said Sirius, lowering him into one of the chairs. "Harry, what's wrong?"

Harry leaned his head over his knees. "I don't know. I'm so dizzy."

"Dizzy?" Sirius looked up at Ron and Hermione. "Take him home. I'll be there in a few minutes. I have to talk to Dumbledore."

"Ok," said Hermione.

"Let's go, Harry," said Ron, grabbing his arm and hauling him up. Harry swayed. Hermione caught his other arm.

Harry's vision was all wacked out too. "Don't let go of me, Ron," whispered Harry. "Please."

"I won't, Harry," assured Ron.

Twice on the way home Harry grabbed at someone's arm.

"I'm here, Harry," said Hermione, the first time.

"We've got you," said Ron, the second.

"I feel like I'm about to slide into oblivion," muttered Harry.

"Well you know I won't let you," said Hermione matter-of-factly.

That made Harry feel better. But the feel of Sirius' chair as he sank into it in front of the fire had a much better appeal to it. His head fell back on the cushion. "I feel terrible."

"What's he done to you?"

"Ginny," shouted Ron. "What are you doing here?"

“What do you think, Ron?” shouted Ginny.

“SHHHH,” said Hermione.

“It’s all right, Hermione,” said Harry. “I’m dizzy but there isn’t any pain. My vision is messed up though.”

“Maybe Ginny is right,” said Ron. “Maybe he did something to you.” Ron was bending over Harry looking into his face.

“I don’t know, Ron,” said Harry weakly.

“Ask him,” said Ron. “You know he’ll tell you.”

Harry blinked up at Ron. He was right but...

“No, Harry,” cried Hermione. “You can’t leave. What if you can’t get back?”

Harry raised a weak hand to his scar. *Voldemort*.

Harry was a little surprised to feel the pain right away.

“You came.”

“Of course I came,” said Voldemort looking around the living room. He noted Harry’s friends in the room and turned back to Harry.

Harry groaned, leaning forward on his legs again.

“Oh, my,” said Voldemort. “What ever is the problem, Harry?”

“That’s what we want to know,” Ginny demanded. “What have you done to him?”

Voldemort turned toward Ginny slowly. “Ah, the little Quidditch chaser. Quite a champion of Harry Potter, are you?”

Hermione grabbed her arm and pulled her back. “Please,” said Hermione. “Do you know what’s wrong with him?”

Voldemort looked at Harry then at Ron.

“He’s dizzy,” said Ron. “And his eye sight is all messed up.”

Harry felt Voldemort come closer and bend down to look into his face. “Harry, open your eyes,” said Voldemort.

Harry couldn’t even distinguish those red slits as he looked into them.

“Are your ears ringing?” said Voldemort.

Harry shook his head.

Voldemort turned his head. “Ron, come here,” said Voldemort. “Hold out your hand.”

He turned back to Harry. “Harry, take Ron’s hand and squeeze it as tight as you can.”

Harry’s blurry gaze turned to Ron then on his hand. He took Ron’s hand and squeezed.

He heard a cry of pain. Was it his own?

“Let go, Harry,” said Voldemort.

Let go of what? Harry looked at his hands then up. He saw Ron. Ron was holding one of his hands tightly under his arm. Harry blinked at him, trying to focus. He squinted. “Ron? You all right?”

Harry heard a gasp and managed to turn his head. There were two people standing to his right.

“Harry.”

Harry looked up.

A tight grip attached around his chin and the dizziness instantly went away. His eyes focused on Voldemort’s red stare.

“It’s gone,” whispered Harry.

“And what do you feel now?” said Voldemort.

“Just the pain from your touch.”

“Do you know what the problem is?” said Hermione.

Voldemort sent her a glance before returning his gaze to Harry. “Oh indeed I do.”

“Can you help him?” said Ron.

Voldemort stared into Harry’s eyes. “I can help him,” said Voldemort. “In fact, I am the only one who *can* help him.”

“Lord Voldemort,” said Hermione a little breathlessly. “Can you explain?”

Voldemort let go of Harry and turned to her.

The dizziness hit Harry so hard he had to put his head to his knees. “Hermione Granger, you could probably explain it better than I could,” said Voldemort.

“It has to do with you feeding magic off each other, doesn’t it,” said Hermione.

“Yes,” said Voldemort, turning to Harry. “Harry has reached a threshold. He needs a little more power to get him through it.”

“What do you have to do?” asked Ron.

Voldemort sent him a glance. “I have to touch his scar, of course.”

“NO!” cried Ginny.

Voldemort cast her another interested look. “Who is this girl?”

Ron jumped in front of her. “She’s my sister.”

Voldemort sighed. “Ah well.” He turned to Harry. “Will you accept my power, Harry?” said Voldemort. “I can not help you unless you accept it.”

Chapter 20

The Order of The Phoenix

“We’ve got you, Voldemort,” said Sirius from the doorway. Magical ropes shot from Sirius wand around Voldemort. “*Expelliarmus.*” Voldemort’s wand flew across the room to Sirius.

Voldemort laughed. “Highly amusing, Sirius,” said Voldemort as the ropes broke free and his wand went back to him. “You are not strong enough to subdue me.”

“There are a hundred aurors next door, Voldemort,” said Sirius.

“Yes, yes,” said Voldemort, unimpressed. “I will deal with them when they get here.” He looked back down at Harry. “But right now, Harry needs me and that is what is important.”

Voldemort grabbed Harry’s face again. Again the dizziness went away and the pain was back.

“Isn’t that right, Harry?”

The aurors were coming. Voldemort would be caught. The nightmare would be over. Harry had to keep him there.

Harry weakly reached up and took a hold of Voldemort’s wrists. Voldemort look down Harry’s hands then at him.

“Am I strong enough to keep you here?” said Harry.

“Ah but you are, Harry,” said Voldemort. “I am here for you.”

Harry grip on Voldemort was pretty weak but Voldemort didn’t shake it off.

“Hold on to him, Harry,” said Sirius. “You can keep him here.”

“Harry,” said Voldemort. “Let go of me. Your pain is too great.”

The pain was rather bad but Voldemort wasn’t leaving. The aurors were coming. Harry concentrated on keeping Voldemort there.

“Harry, I have given you much strength, but you can’t physically keep me here,” said Voldemort.

“You can, Harry,” said Sirius. “He would have left by now if he could. Hold on.”

Voldemort reached a hand toward Harry’s scar. Harry’s hand was still wrapped around Voldemort’s wrist but only had strength enough to hold on.

“Harry, let go. I won’t leave you,” said Voldemort. “You need my strength. I have to hear you accept it first.”

“Harry, don’t let go,” said Sirius. “They’re coming.”

The door banged open and Voldemort raised his wand.

“*Avada Kedavra.*”

Ginny and Hermione screamed as Harry heard a body hit the ground.

“Not yet, Albus,” said Voldemort. “I’m not ready.”

Professor Dumbledore?

“Hold on Harry,” said Sirius

“Just accept me, Harry and this will all be over,” said Voldemort.

It sounded so easy. So simple.

Harry eyes locked with Voldemort’s. He couldn’t look away.

“You need me right now, Harry,” said Voldemort.

Harry took a breath. “Will you punish me for doing the right thing?” he whispered hoarsely. Pain had taken over his body.

“I must, Harry. You know I must.”

Voldemort’s hand grew closer to the scar.

“Hold on Harry,” shouted Sirius. “Your father could do it. You can too.”

“My father,” echoed Harry. He stared at Voldemort. “My father,” said Harry again, getting a firm hold. *I can do this.*

“Very good, Harry,” said Voldemort.

People started apparating into the room and Voldemort pressed his palm onto the scar.

Harry hit the ground screaming. Above him, he wasn’t sure what he heard.

“Rowan,” Harry called.

She came immediately and perched on his back.

“Not me girl,” said Harry. “Go save Professor Dumbledore.”

By her song, Harry could tell she was quite annoyed. “Do it now,” said Harry weakly. “I order you too.” Harry felt her leave her perch on his back and slipped into heavenly painless blackness.

Harry awoke to voices.

“Come and have something to eat, Sirius,” said Remus. “Please.”

“I won’t leave him,” said Sirius hoarsely.

“He’s not going anywhere.”

“What if he wakes up,” said Sirius. Harry felt a head fall onto the back of his hand then realized Sirius was gripping Harry’s hand. Harry heard the door close quietly and could assume Remus had left.

Harry opened his eyes and was surprised he could see. The pain he felt was manageable so he turned his head.

“Sirius,” said Harry, his voice sounded as hoarse as Sirius’.

Sirius shot to his feet so fast he pulled Harry arm up. Harry groaned and Sirius gently laid it back on the bed.

“Harry,” said Sirius leaning over him.

Sirius looked terrible. There were shadows under his blood shot eyes as if he hadn’t slept or eaten. His face was covered in a dark shadow of stubble. He also looked like he want to pull Harry into a back breaking hug but didn’t want to hurt him.

“How do you feel?”

Harry considered the question. “Not too bad actually,” said Harry. “Did they get him?”

“Harry, you really should-“

“Don’t blow me off on this one, Sirius,” said Harry firmly. “I want to know. Did they get him?”

“Yes, Harry. They got him.”

Harry sighed with relief. “And is Dumbledore all right?”

“Yes, thanks to you,” said Sirius. “Although Rowan and Albus are very annoyed with you about it.”

“Why?” said Harry.

“Because Rowan is still young. It took most of her strength to save Albus,” said Sirius. “She didn’t have anything left for you. And Fawkes is at the end of his cycle and couldn’t help you either. You’ve been in a coma for three weeks Harry. Madam Pomfrey said – well she said,” Sirius swallowed hard.

“What?” said Harry. “That I was a goner?”

“Well, in a manner of speaking.”

Harry laughed.

“Harry, it isn’t funny.”

But Harry thought it was. "I bet Trewlaney was thrilled to hear that prognosis," said Harry still chuckling.

"Harry, the whole school thinks you're on your deathbed and you're laughing," said Sirius. "You haven't lost your mind, have you?"

Harry smiled up at Sirius. "Sirius, I think I've proven how durable I am when facing Voldemort and the easiest way to assure everyone is to show them that I'm not dead."

Sirius finally smiled as if realizing that fact.

"Um, I'm not, am I?" said Harry, suddenly unsure.

Sirius laughed then. "No, Harry. You're not."

"Whew," said Harry. "You had me worried there for a minute."

Harry struggled to sit up and Sirius put a hand on his shoulder. "Whoa, where do you think you're going?"

"I'm just sitting up," said Harry. Harry held out his hand and the bed bent up behind him so he could lean back into it. "How come I can see, by the way?"

Sirius sat back down and took Harry's hand again. "Severus fixed your eyes when you first got back and Hermione's been changing your lenses. She wanted to make sure you could see when you woke up." Sirius sighed. "She was quite adamant that you would wake up."

"Well, that's Hermione," said Harry. "She said she wasn't about to let me die." Harry smiled recalling all the help she and Ron were. "They helped me find another way," said Harry softly.

"What do you mean?"

"To kill Voldemort without dying myself," said Harry.

Sirius expression went so serious, Harry blinked at him.

"He is dead, isn't he?" said Harry.

“Not exactly,” said Sirius.

Harry sat up. “What do you mean not exactly? You said they got him,” Harry said his temper rising. “Will you tell me, damn it.”

“All right, all right,” said Sirius, moving a hand to Harry’s shoulder and pushing him back into the reclined bed. “Calm down, Harry.”

“Calm down?” said Harry alarmed. “He didn’t get away, did he?” The thought of Voldemort still out there plotting more ways to rule in terror and torment Harry sent a shudder through him.

“No, Harry,” assured Sirius. “He’s in Azkaban.”

Harry sighed. “Well don’t scare me like that, Sirius.”

Sirius smiled.

“So tell me what happened,” said Harry.

“Well when Voldemort touched your scar, you did let go,” said Sirius and he hesitated. “And well, Voldemort just stood there looking down at you with a very strange smile. “The aurors apparated around him and tied him up. He simply stood there. He watched as your bird healed Albus and when Albus stood up, he said ‘Now I’m ready.’”

“What did Dumbledore do?” said Harry, surprised by this information. What was Voldemort doing?

“He directed the aurors to take him away and took Rowan to you,” said Sirius. “He checked to see if you were alive (no one else was brave enough to go near you), but once he noticed Rowan couldn’t help you, he magicked a stretcher and put you on it. Then he sent Ron for Penelope.”

“Penelope?” said Harry. “Why?”

“She’s the heir of Ravenclaw, Harry,” said Sirius. Dumbledore had to get you here fast before you bled to death.

“I spoiled her wedding,” said Harry feeling miserable.

Sirius smiled and touched his shoulder. He shook his head. "No, Harry. She took one look at you and turned to Percy. She said, 'Harry captured You-Know-Who at our wedding, Percy.' She seemed thrilled. Percy seemed pretty pleased too."

Harry shrugged. "Well I didn't exactly capture him. The aurors did."

"But you were strong enough to hold him here until they got there."

"Not according to him," said Harry, still wondering about Voldemort's strange words. "So why didn't they kill him?"

Sirius sighed. "The Ministry, in there infinite stupidity, wants a public execution. To make an example of him."

"Figures," muttered Harry.

Sirius looked a little hesitant.

"What?" said Harry.

"There's more," said Sirius. "Voldemort filed for a stay of execution using the wizard's right to see his subjugator before he dies."

"Meaning," said Harry. He didn't like the sound of *that*.

"Meaning, Harry, that they can't kill him until he gets to see you."

Great. "What if I had died?"

"Then they could kill him, but he seemed pretty confident that you wouldn't die."

"And what happened to the Death Eaters?" said Harry.

"Some of them have scattered, but most of them are probably still in the hidden Compound," said Sirius. "No doubt trying to figure out a way to break Voldemort out, or waiting for him to do it."

"The Dementors?" said Harry.

"He isn't being guarded by Dementors. They were his allies," said Sirius. "The cell is sealed by an ancient spell that several very strong wizards hold on it at the same time.

"Disconcerting thing is that Voldemort doesn't seem worried."

"No?" said Harry.

"He's acting as if he arranged the whole thing."

Harry really didn't like the sound of *that*. He forced his thoughts away from Voldemort. "What about Catherine and Mr. Johnson?"

"They're fine," said Sirius. "They turned up in Hogsmeade."

"Turned up?"

"Yes," said Sirius frowning. "Um, they were dumped."

Harry swallowed. "Dumped?"

"Er-"

"Spit it out, Sirius."

"Harry, their memories were modified," Sirius told him. "Neither one of them remembers anything that took place at Voldemort's camp."

Harry blinked at his godfather. "What about-"

"Or at Hogwarts." Sirius patted Harry's hand. "I'm sorry, Harry. She doesn't remember meeting you."

Harry absorbed that, not really knowing how to feel. He hadn't really known her all that well but she had been someone to talk to at the compound.

"They reported to the Ministry," Sirius went on. "They went back to the States a couple of days ago."

At least they were safe. "So where are Ron and Hermione?" Harry asked.

“Probably at the feast,” said Sirius.

Harry’s heart leapt. “Can we go?” said Harry. “I’m starving.”

“You aren’t strong enough,” said Sirius.

To test that theory, Harry threw his legs over the side of the bed and stood up. His legs were a little shaky, but as he moved around, they seemed well enough. “Please, Sirius. I’m a little sore but I’m OK.” Harry’s eyes moved over his godfather. “You look worse than I do,” said Harry.

Sirius smirked at him. “Well, stop making me worry so much about you,” said Sirius. “I swear, being Harry Potter’s godfather—“

“Is a nightmare,” suggested Harry.

Sirius laughed and ruffled Harry’s hair. “No, Harry. But it’s a full time job. Get dressed and I’ll get cleaned up.”

Chapter 21

A New Beginning

“The end,” Harry heard from out in the Hallway when he and Sirius approached the Great Hall. “Of another year.”

Harry stopped to listen. He didn’t want to interrupt Dumbledore’s speech. Sirius stopped too and looked down at Harry.

“As you know,” Dumbledore went on, “Lord Voldemort has been subdued and imprisoned. Once again due to the courage and perseverance of Harry Potter, who I now owe my life.”

Harry took a step back. He didn’t want to go in now. It would be too embarrassing.

“Come on,” said Sirius. “Show them what you’re made of.” He moved to the opening into the Hall.

“There is a great fear for-“ Dumbledore cut himself off. “Sirius?”

Harry heard the scrapes of chairs from the staff table.

“Oh, good heavens,” said Prof. McGonagall.

Harry saw Sirius turn his head to look from the staff table to the room.

“NOOO!”

Harry heard Hermione. What? Had they thought Sirius was there to tell them that Harry had died?

Sirius looked at Harry. He took a few steps into the doorway. The Hall went silent.

“Sorry, Professor,” said Harry self-consciously. He dared a glance up at the staff table. Dumbledore smiled at him. Then he looked at the Gryffindor table and met Ron’s gaze. He shrugged. “I’m hungry,” said Harry.

The hall exploded with cheers as Sirius dragged Harry to staff table.

“Welcome back, Harry,” said Dumbledore.

Professor McGonagall actually hugged him. Then Hagrid nearly broke him in half.

“Easy Hagrid,” said Sirius. “He’s still very weak.”

“Sorry, Harry,” Hagrid sniffled.

The rest of the teachers shook his hand and when he looked up at Snape, there was a very stern look on the potion master’s face.

“So, what have you got to say for yourself, Potter?” said Snape, crossing his arms.

“Um.” Harry thought hard. “Fifty points from Gryffindor because famous Harry Potter managed to stay alive – again?” said Harry.

Severus Snape laughed, then reached out and ruffled Harry’s already untidy hair. “Go and eat, Potter. You’ve earned it.”

Harry turned to the room and the cheering started again. Ron and Hermione hit him at top speed and if Sirius hadn’t been with him they would have knocked him down.

“I knew you wouldn’t die,” cried Hermione. “I just knew it.” She was crying all over Harry’s shoulder.

“Mental,” muttered Ron. He squeezed Harry’s shoulder then grabbed his arm and dragged him over to the Gryffindor table where Harry received more back slapping and hugs then he could recall ever getting in his life.

“Can I eat now?” said Harry. He sat down and started piling food onto his plate.

Someone held a plate out to him. “Canary Cream, Harry?”

Harry looked up at Fred. He had an ear to ear grin on his face. Harry reached toward the platter. “Yeah, I think I’m brave enough to try one of those.”

The table laughed but it wasn't one of the twins' trick candies so nothing happened when Harry took a bite.

The weather was near perfect as Harry, Hermione, Ginny and Ron settled into a compartment on the Hogwarts Express. Sirius had assured him that he would meet Harry at Kings Cross so Harry could ride home with his friends. They settled their assorted pets around the compartment and sat down. Rowan was still giving Harry chastising looks, but Harry tried to ignore them.

For the first time in his life, Harry was happy leaving Hogwarts. He would have a completely Dursley free summer.

"He'll be back you know, Harry."

It was Malfoy. He didn't have his thugs with him but he was standing in the doorway with a very serious look on his face.

"They can't cage him and they won't be able to kill him," said Draco.

Draco didn't sound like he was being nasty or harsh or even taunting.

"Why do you think so?" said Harry.

"Because my father said that no one has enough power to kill him now that he's been feeding power off you," said Draco. "My father thinks that you're the only one who will be strong enough to kill him."

"Do you believe that, Draco?" said Harry.

"Yeah, Harry," said Draco. "I'm afraid I do believe it."

Draco left and Harry turned to Ron.

"Well, that was weird," said Ron.

Harry shrugged. He didn't care. For now, Harry was free. He had no Voldemort to worry about, a home with Sirius for the entire summer and days of playing quidditch with the Weasleys. Harry smiled.

"Why are you smiling, Harry?" said Hermione with a grin of her own.

Harry leaned back into the cushion and closed his eyes.

“My life doesn’t feel like a nightmare, right now,” said Harry.

The End

TBC in Harry Potter and The Unexpected Inheritance